Eye of the Beholder

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Eye of the Beholder

by Bishimin

Summary

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder; and as the blue eyed, curly haired boy was being forced onto the stage Hannibal couldn’t help but find both beauty and potential.

A potential to become.

Chapter 1

A low murmur filled the dimly lit room as masked socialites mingled around tables. Thin champagne glasses clutched between their crooked fingers and stained at the rims with saliva, no presence of food to be seen for it would not mix well with the brewing atmosphere. No, this was not a place for appetizers to be stomached.

Hannibal took occupancy at one of the farthest tables, hidden in the shadows of the room and situated nowhere near the touch of the blaring stage spotlights. The simple white mask sat snugly across his eyes and nose, having been made to fit with his precise measurements, but he still found himself exercising caution. Preferring to always remain in the outskirts of these events, like a predator stalking the watering hole.

It amused him to think the bodies filling the room considered themselves at the top of the food chain. Fattened with wealth and luxuries, one of the seven deadly sins in every single one of them. Here to enact their power onto some poor helpless prey presented to them on a silver platter. Oh how wrong they were as they sipped at cheap alcohol, blissfully unaware of the true predator that camouflaged perfectly within them.

The lights flickered above them and Hannibal adjusted his seat as everyone else began to take their own. Nobody approached his table, leaving the three other chairs surrounding it empty. Instead they scrambled pathetically for the front row, mumbling bitter apologies as they shoved past each other to get the best seats in the house. Close enough for the white paddles to be seen more clearly from the raised stage, to secure their winnings when the opportunity arose. Hannibal took notice of a certain man in the low grade chaos. Shorter and round, stocky, unimportant to the untrained eye yet in his haste he groped the women accompanying their husbands. Using the crowd as a poorly veiled coverup for the blatant sexual harassment.

Hannibal took note of the mask the man wore, a half mask like his own yet black and ill fitting with feathers decorating the temples, tacky.

The room finally seemed to settle as a disappointed grumble filled the tables closer to him, upset that their chances of taking home a prize was being hindered thanks to poor seating. Hannibal found it childish and nothing more, almost amusing. Spotlights snapped to life from overhead and were aimed at the center of the ornate stage. Victorian style moldings decorated the edges while red velvet curtains lined with gold draped from the sides. The theater was an older one that still held its charm despite being abandoned, something Hannibal had found helped him to tolerate the otherwise abhorrent nature of the auctions. There was always beauty in art to be appreciated.

A man emerged from behind the curtains to the right of the stage. Dressed finely in a three piece suit and standing tall and stiff, hands folded neatly behind his back. He stood behind a microphone that was placed slightly off center, the main of the stage saved for what everyone was truly here to see. The man was familiar to Hannibal for he was not wearing a mask. Unabashed in his participation with this particular slice of life and having lead most of the

auctions Hannibal had been to so far. Tobias, was what he recalled the man being named from a conversation he had stumbled upon.

“Good evening ladies and gentlemen and thank you for joining us.” Tobias leaned closer to the mic as he spoke yet his hands never moved from their hidden position at the small of his back. “Tonight I think we have an excellent selection and I should hope you all agree with me.”

The room broke out in a murmur of excitement and Hannibal couldn’t help the slight smile tugging at his lips. A script was what Tobias read from, a planned out speech to entice the simple minded men and women. Raising hopes that would undoubtedly be crushed for an unlucky few but like a gamblers addiction to losing they would be back again to hopefully win big this time. That was always amusing, recognizing those unlucky few and no doubt being roped into them for his own frequency of the auctions. When he was anything but that.

“Now, enough chit chat, allow me to introduce our first piece.” Tobias outstretched his arm in a sweeping motion to welcome onto the stage a naked, collared woman. “Number 320571.”

Hannibal appraised the woman, just as everyone else, but found himself uninterested in a matter of seconds. She was a plain woman, blonde hair, short, thin, bigger ears on display from the tightly done ponytail. Nothing to write home about or waste money on, yet that didn’t stop paddles from being raised. Beside that, Hannibal wasn’t here to purchase, at least not from the selection they presented.

“Do I see five?” Tobias called out and in response another paddle was raised. “How about eight?”

Paddles were quickly dropped, apparently agreeing with Hannibal that the woman was nothing special, leaving but just one lucky winner.

“Sold to the man in the gold mask for 8,000 dollars.”

The audience applauded and the woman was lead off the stage as quickly as she appeared. Hannibal was unaware of what went on after a purchase was made. On occasion he has seen the winner leave their table and make way for backstage but for the most part they stayed till the end. Finding pleasure in the event he guessed.

“Now onto our second piece, number 463890.”

The auction continued on with uneventful repetitiveness. People were forced onto the stage, some were sold, others were not. Some put up a fight, freshly captured and still painfully full of life, while most went willingly. Having been broken long ago. Hannibal wondered idly how long it took for each person to be broken and if some simply never did. They never did see those ones.

Everything was quickly coming to a close and Hannibal found himself at a slight disappointment. He had only found one, maybe two, suitable choices for victims in the crowd of socialites, an unusually small number for an event such as this. Sure he could simply pluck another from the crowd as if they were mere fish from the market but that wasn’t the game.

He began to gather himself from the table like many others had done already but hesitated as an unfamiliar man whispered something to Tobias. Tobias seemed agitated yet nodded in agreement before facing the crowd for what would be the final time tonight.

“It appears ladies and gents that we have one final piece tonight, allow me to introduce number 261147.”

Unlike the others Tobias didn’t wave his arm in introduction as the naked man was hobbled onto the stage. In fact he didn’t even spare him a glance, which was quite rude.

“It is the oldest of our pieces at thirty years old and has been in the system since it was eighteen, do I see one?”

The audience was filled with stifled laughter but the sound fell on deaf ears as Hannibal’s attention was captivated by the man. An unruly mess of chocolate curls sat atop his head, long enough to nearly brush his shoulders. His eyes were downcast, hiding the color, and a light dusting of stubble decorated his jaw. Which was pronounced yet held a slight femininity to its structure. Bones showed through his wound covered skin but it was obvious that with proper nutrition and exercise the man would reveal an attractive build. He was beautiful, an Adonis meant for worship and ribbons, not chains.

Hannibal was intrigued, his interest piqued, and without a second thought he raised the previously untouched paddle from the table. There was potential in the man trembling on stage, could see it in the way the spotlights caught the whites of his eyes as he glared through his brows.

Tobias’ eyes widened at the sight of the paddle and the crowd turned in their seats, curiosity hidden behind their poorly crafted masks.

“Do I hear three?” Tobias called out and again the crowd murmured with shock while Hannibal’s gaze shifted beneath his mask to settle on a man who had suddenly raised his paddle.

The man was adorned in a three piece suit beneath a coat more suited for the Baltimore winters than an auction. His mask, like the rest, covered his eyes and nose but from what Hannibal could see it was crafted from red cloth. Fitted more snugly than the others that made it clear he had had it tailored for such an event. As if sensing Hannibal’s gaze he turned, a smug smile spreading across his face as his brittle, blond sprigs of hair bounced dramatically.

“How about four?” Tobias countered.

Hannibal’s paddle remained raised in the air as well as his opponent’s, except now the man standing on the stage had raised his head. Bottomless eyes staring through the souls of the crowd and directly into Hannibal. He smiled and the man’s head dropped as every muscle in his body tensed, untapped potential boiling beneath his stretched out flesh.

“Dare I say five?”

The two paddles still remained except Hannibal stood, having decided to bring the night to a close and end the silly game of back and forth that he would undoubtedly win. “How about fifteen?” He offered and the crowd gasped, spinning in their seats to witness reactions from every angle.

Tobias’ brows were raised and Hannibal watched from the corner of his eye as his opponent lowered his paddle. Laying it flat to the table before standing and exiting the room, closely followed by two other sharply dressed, burly men.

“Well…I suppose it is sold to the man in the white mask for 15,000 dollars.”

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Hannibal found himself being lead through the hallways of the backstage by Tobias. His ever forming curiosity of the behind the scenes workings of the auctions finally coming to an end. They passed employees, many of them dressed just as professional as the audience, while others wore simple black t-shirts and jeans. Those few were usually handling unsold pieces, either forcing them into rooms or restraining them for what he assumed would be transport.

None of them piqued Hannibal’s interest, despite some desperately seeking eye contact as if he was their one chance at escaping. As if he wasn’t back there in the bowels of the theater to collect his own purchase.

“We are all very surprised you’ve decided to purchase it,” Tobias said, their stride momentarily interrupted as two men past them carrying a young man by his shoulders and feet. “Its been in the highway for so long, we were considering throwing it away.”

Hannibal hummed, the idea of missing this opportunity surprisingly upsetting to him and leaving a sour taste on his tongue. “Well I am thoroughly pleased I discovered him when I did.”

“It would’ve gone for so much less, I doubt that other man would have gone higher than eight thousand,” Tobias continued as they moved down winding walkways.

“I simply did not wish to waste anymore of our time,” Hannibal explained.

Tobias nodded and stopped before a wooden door which had been painted a tacky black. “Inside you will find a table, our broker, and your purchase. You will exchange payments and discuss our terms, any questions you have will be answered by her. Do you understand?”

Hannibal smiled and tipped his chin at the man. “Thank you but I do have one question for you.”

“Yes?”

“Do you know the name of the man I purchased?”

Tobias seemed taken aback by the question but regained his composure quickly and steeled his expression. “I apologize but I do not, that was long ago lost in the paperwork, perhaps it can tell you itself if it remembers.”

Hannibal nodded, deciding that that would be a good first hurdle to cross with the man. “Oh I’m sure he will.”

Tobias offered nothing more in the form of conversation and opened the door to reveal a matching painted black room. Unflattering fluorescents hung from the ceiling while an oval shaped wooden table made its home in the center of the room. The broker was a woman, of which Hannibal had not expected to see. Trafficking was such a male dominated crime, he almost found himself wanting to delve into the psyche of what drove a woman to work around such filth. But those questions were immediately put on hold as he caught the fleeting gaze of the man sat beside her.

He was clothed now, in a grey t-shirt that hung too loose on his body and Hannibal could only make assumptions of what he was wearing beneath the wood of the table. His hands were hidden in his lap and he was slumped forward, a survival tactic to go unnoticed, useless when nobody could ignore such a breathtaking creature.

The woman perked up, frown lines pulled into a mimic of a smile. “Good evening sir my name is Purnell and thank you for purchasing from our highway, please have a seat.”

Hannibal took the chair across from her and noticed the minuscule flinch from the man as the legs scraped the wooden floor. Sensitive to sound.

“We are very pleased you have decided to purchase this piece for it has been in our collection for some time now.”

“Him,” Hannibal corrected.

Purnell’s eyebrows raised. “I’m sorry?”

“I would kindly request that you refer to him as a person now, not an object.”

Purnell’s lips pulled into a tight line and the crows feet around her eyes deepened. “Well okay, you are aware he is thirty years old, you purchased him for fifteen thousand dollars, and contractually I’m obligated to tell you he had been purchased at one point but returned three years later.”

Hannibal glanced at the boy but his eyes were downcast, focused on something yet nothing at all, clearly somewhere else in his mind. He wondered where does a boy such as himself have left to go.

“How old was he when he was first purchased?” Hannibal inquired.

“Eighteen, I’ve been told that was when he was first trafficked.” She flipped through the manila folder of papers in front of her. “I have also been told that he is supposedly mute but we are unsure if it’s by choice or damage.”

Again Hannibal couldn’t stop himself from glancing at the man, who was becoming more and more interesting as the seconds ticked by. Three years would be such a lengthy amount of time to keep another human being only to return them.

“I see, that is of no concern to me and does not effect my decision,” he said.

Purnell smiled in earnest at that. No doubt excited to finally be rid of the man that they had been lugging around for eleven years. She pulled a paper from the folder and clicked a pen from the pocket of her blazer, sliding both across the table.

“I need your signature here and by calling this number you may return him at any point.” She pointed at a dotted line and a phone number beneath it. “And then there is the matter of payment.”

Taking the offered pen Hannibal signed with one of his many aliases before pulling out his checkbook from his suit jacket. “Who do I make it out to?”

“Baltimore Highway Company please.”

Hannibal nodded and finished off the check with a flourish of his wrist. He slid the papers back to her and she tucked them neatly into the folder before closing it. She smiled and folded her hands on the table.

“Well it has been a pleasure doing business with you sir, would you like us to bring him to your car around the back or would you like to walk him out yourself?”

Hannibal stood, scraping the legs of the chair on the flooring and causing the man to flinch once again. He smiled as he stared down at the mop of now trembling curls.

“Thank you and I will walk him myself.”

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The car ride from the theater to Hannibal’s home was uneventful, with the man sitting rigid and silent in the passenger seat the entire way. His eyes never straying from the unfocused, far away look into the windshield; dissociation being Hannibal’s expert opinion. Another survival tactic, one that would be far harder to train out of him.

They pulled into the driveway and Hannibal clicked off the headlights, draping them in the cover of darkness. It was unlikely any of his neighbors would be up at such an hour anyway. Hannibal stepped out of the car and rounded the front to open the door for the boy, who acknowledged his presence with a small shift of his eyes.

“I will not touch you, you may get out yourself.”

The boy hesitated and Hannibal took a step back before he shakily climbed out of the car. The theater employees had given the boy a pair of what could only be described as cheap boxer shorts to wear along with the t-shirt, clothing that Hannibal would throw away at the first opportunity.

“Follow me.”

They walked to the front door, the boy trailing closely behind and waiting to the side as Hannibal unlocked the door. The locked clicked behind them and he turned around to face the

boy, who's eyes were too far downcast to notice.

"Your room is upstairs, first door on the left, there are spare clothes in the closet and everything you will need in the bathroom, do you understand?" he asked. An offer of independence he knew the boy would never pass up on.

The boy's eyes raised yet Hannibal could tell his gaze stopped short at his chin. He nodded, and Hannibal allowed the slightest of smiles to graze his lips.

"Good but I do have one question for you," he said.

There was a tremble in the boy's gaze and the muscles of his jaw flexed beneath his skin.

"What is your name?"

The boy swallowed, obvious in the way his adams apple bobbed, and his eyes met Hannibal's. The irises were the color of sadness, a pale blue, bordered with bruises of exhaustion from years of torment. But beneath them, there was something more, a darkness waiting to be brought forth by nurturing hands.

"Will."

Hannibal smiled, the man's voice was small, raspy from underuse, nearly unintelligible. "Hello Will, you may call me Hannibal."

Chapter 2

The grid of the cage pressed into Will's skin as he forced himself backwards in the small space. As far away from the figure as he could get. As small as he could make himself. Shrinking and hoping that a black hole could open in his chest to swallow him whole.

His eyes were shut yet he could still see him. An afterimage burned into his vision from being forced to look for so long. A dark blur of a man, the devil reincarnated in his personal slice of hell. With a voice like gravel being scraped into wounded knees and palms, grating and sharp.

The cage door was jerked open and hands were upon him, like sandpaper on newborn skin, unforgiving in their touch. He cried but the figure didn't care. He begged but it never mattered, if anything it made everything so much worse.

He was out of the cage but the phantom press of the metal grid still ached on his back, there would be marks, bruises even.

The figure spoke, open your eyes he said, more like snarled. Gravel in cuts.

Will shook his head and grappled at the bare feet of the figure. Trembling hands grabbing at the fabric of pant legs and thick ankles as tears slipped from his nose to wet the skin beneath him.

A hand was in his hair, gripping around mats of blood and curls to haul him away. Onto his knees, face to face now with the figure.

He spoke again, open your damn eyes, and Will did.

There was no figure. No cage. No tacky linoleum flooring and bare feet. But there were tears and Will blinked them away as the memories of last nights events came flooding into his mind. Memories of a threat, of an auction, a man with an accent, a name, and a bed.

He splayed out his fingers where they had been gripping the duvet, running the flats of his palms over the stupidly soft material. The man had granted him a bedroom. An entire room, all for him.

He could remember now. Speaking to the strange man for the first time, said man asking for his name, which he hadn't thought of in years. The man ordering him to wash and change yet the tone of his voice held no threat to it. Thus how Will found himself now, clothed in the rags from the auction, caked in filth, and placed atop the no doubt expensive sheets of the beautifully done up bed.

If the man had truly meant the order then Will knew what was next and he sat up, too fast for the state of his body but he couldn't help it. His muscles tensed with the knowledge of the impending punishment while his heart began to race. Next came the tremors and suddenly he couldn't stop himself from sliding off the bed to kneel on the floor. With his hands clasped

behind his back and head bowed, a submission pose, a pathetic attempt to lessen the blow. He knew that.

Tears burned at the corners of Will's eyes but he blinked them away. It didn't help to cry, never had, and he wouldn't give this man the satisfaction of seeing him break so soon. No, he'd save that for after the punishment.

It felt like hours had gone by until Will heard the telltale sound of footsteps, but then again he had lost the concept of time years ago. A knock on the door followed by the knob turning and the tremors were back, while his heart lodged painfully between the spaces of his ribs. His head was bowed but he could hear the man, feel his presence like a physical thing. It was unnerving and Will was worried the man could hear the racing of his heart.

"Good morning Will, did you sleep?" The way his voiced carried Will's name had him shivering, his skin breaking out in goosebumps.

Nobody used his name, didn't even know his name, because he was a number. An object for pleasure of others and nothing more, so why was this man hellbent on using it?

Something was placed on the bed, Will could hear the soft sinking of the duvet from the weight, and the man came closer. Until he could see socked feet from beneath his brows if he looked up.

"You did not listen to me last night, did you have issues with the bathroom fixtures?"

Will tensed and his mouth opened, a reflex to answer, before he snapped it shut. Offering instead a shake of his head.

"No? Were you simply too exhausted?"

Will dug his bitten nails into his own flesh, deciding if he should answer truthfully or not. He ended up nodding, a curt thing that was barely a movement that he was worried the man hadn't even caught. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept on an actual bed, so to have one to himself with seemingly no strings attached, it was overwhelming.

"I apologize Will, you were undoubtedly overwhelmed last night and I should have assisted you," the man said and stepped away, socked feet vanishing. "Please stand up and come sit on the bed."

Will hesitated before standing, considering for a second if the man could read his thoughts. He lifted his head as he stood but was caught off guard by the tray set on the foot of the bed. It was filled with food, breakfast, that all looked homemade. As if on cue Will's stomach growled and a cramp of hunger overtook his muscles, he couldn't remember the last time he ate. Nevertheless a proper meal such as this.

"Please Will, sit."

Pulled from the trance the sight of food had set on him Will sat on the edge of the bed, facing forward to instead stare at the drawn curtains. There were windows in the bedroom.

“I tried to prepare something light for your first meal. I cannot imagine the kind of atrocious food you were being served at the theater but you must allow your body to adjust before I am able to properly nourish you.”

The words repeated in Will’s head like an echo, bouncing off the bone arena of his skull and sinking into the soft tissue of his brain. He hadn’t considered how his body would react to proper food but the man had, which hinted that he was a doctor. Or at least someone with knowledge in the medical field. A nurse maybe? No, the man exuded more than that, if he chose a career he strove to be at the top of it. A doctor then.

“I will leave you to eat in private before returning to check on you, does that sound okay Will?”

Another question, another sliver of independence, and suddenly Will was hit with the realization that the man hadn’t punished him. His head twitched and he tried to gaze at the man from his peripherals but he was out of reach. No doubt on purpose, to goad him into looking fully, but he wouldn’t. Not yet at least. So he nodded, because it had been a sufficient answer so far, why stop now?

“Good, enjoy your breakfast Will and please eat slow.” The footsteps retreated, the door clicked shut, and just like that Will was left alone.

The tray of food sat ominously before Will, the empty room even more, and he shifted farther up the bed. Some kind of soup was the centerpiece, chicken probably but it looked far too fancy for such a pedestrian name. Two pieces of toast sat beside the bowl on their own decorative plate, glistening with that he assumed to be butter. While an orange liquid filled a thin yet tall glass placed in the far left corner, orange juice.

Will blinked as his trembling hands hovered over the food, thoroughly overwhelmed. He grabbed the silver spoon, no doubt real silver and not some plated bullshit, and stared. There had to be a catch. A test, that’s what this was, a cruel test. To measure just how severe his first punishment should be. To gauge his previous training and document what needed to be fixed, corrected, beaten out of him.

He dropped the spoon into the soup as if it had burned him and scrambled away from the temptation, until his back hit the wood of the ornate headboard. There were probably cameras in the room, watching and recording his every move. Never alone. Couldn’t be alone. Had never been alone. He was alone now.

Tears stung Will’s eyes except this time he let them fall, placing a shaking hand over his mouth to muffle the screams he felt perched beneath his chin. The muscles of his stomach cramped, far past the simple pains of hunger, and his body ached. His heart hammered further bruises against his ribcage while his lungs gasped for breath that had long been knocked from him.

A part of Will wished to kick the tray from the bed. Watch as the dishware shattered and the floors were stained with fancy broth and juice. Another part of him hoped the man would hear it, come storming into the room, polite facade thrown to the wayside, and kill him. Grab

him by the neck and strangle him until he was truly gone of breath, that no amount of deep breathing could bring it back.

More tears fell from his eyes while a sob escaped from the spaces between his fingers. Knowing his luck he wold never be granted such a quick and somewhat painless death. No. He would be beaten bloody, until his eyes swelled shut and then he'd be thrown away. Forgotten, until internal bleeding took over and he had no choice but to choke to death on his own blood. Then the man would find him, disappointed but not surprised, and he would move on with his perfect life. Attending auction after auction to find yet again what he deemed a suitable toy for his pleasure.

Will shook his head and gasped weakly from behind his tear soaked hand. He pressed himself backwards but the carved wood of the headboard was gone, replaced with the cold metal grid of the cage.

It would leave marks, scars even. He sobbed, the figure was back.

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Nearly thirty minutes had passed when Hannibal decided he couldn't wait any longer and went to check on Will. Finding the boy earlier in such a position was definitely a shock but nothing he hadn't expected. It was a submission pose, probably the first thing the people that took him had taught him. He had also expected Will to have been too overwhelmed last night to do anything other than sleep, but to know the man anticipated punishment was a great insight into what damage would have to be undone. Or at the very most redone to his ideal standards.

Hannibal made his way down the hallway but stopped at the door, his knuckles poised to knock and hand already gripping the knob. It was subtle but the telltale sounds of muffled crying and gasping breaths could be heard from inside the room. Hannibal frowned, his boy was having a panic attack, perhaps even a nervous breakdown.

The first thought that occurred to Hannibal was to leave, to allow Will to self soothe and compose himself, like he was probably used to. But that wasn't what he had brought Will here for which meant he needed to show the boy that he was different. That he was a source of comfort and safety, not fear. Even if it would be scary at first.

Thus how Hannibal found himself forgoing a polite knock and opening the door to find that Will was nowhere to be seen, his sobs the only indication that he was even in the room. Slowly Hannibal stepped into the room, rounding the foot of the bed where the untouched food sat to find Will curled in the corner of the room. He was pressed between the side-table and the wall, with his head buried in his knees and his nails scratching jagged marks into the skin of his bare legs. Hannibal knelt, content in savoring the display of raw emotion before he stepped in.

Will was hyperventilating and mumbling incoherently, a ptsd episode, triggered by something that had occurred when Hannibal had left the room. He glanced at the full tray of food, considering that it had been the cause, if so he had more work to do with the boy than he had previously thought.

“Will,” he said, softly, not wanting to startle the boy. But it appeared to be too soft, as Will gave no indication of hearing his name.

Hannibal crept closer. Close enough to see clearly the damage the boy was doing to himself, to his legs, in the form of bloody trails from bitten nails. Which he would not tolerate, would not sit back and watch as such a marvelous thing sought to harm himself.

“Will I’m going to touch you now.” Hannibal grabbed the boy’s arms, not quite his wrists but close enough that he could restrain him if necessary.

Will cried out, almost a scream but closer to a gruff approximation from years of his voice going underused. To Hannibal’s surprise the boy was quite strong and it took some effort to wrestle him from the corner and into his arms. But once he had Will he held him close, pressing his forehead to the matted curls of the boy and pinning down his arms.

“Shhh Will,” Hannibal whispered. “Whatever you are seeing is not real, you are trapped in the past.”

“S-stop,” Will croaked as he continued to struggle.

Again Hannibal shushed him and moved Will’s thin wrists into one of his hands to smooth circles on the boy’s back. Will flinched at the touch and Hannibal retracted his hand, moving it instead to settle on the boy’s nape and massage at the tense muscle.

“I’d like you to open your eyes Will, please,” Hannibal whispered.

Will shook his head but his breathing was beginning to slow, his sobs tapering off to soft hiccups.

“Where are you right now?” Hannibal questioned.

Whimpers left Will’s lips and again he shook his head, except his body was relaxing, sagging into Hannibal.

Hannibal hummed and released Will’s wrists but kept his hand firmly on the boy’s nape. “Come back to the present Will, the monsters in your past cannot get you here.”

Will’s hiccups weakened to soft sniffs and he fell completely into Hannibal’s hold, his body trembling. The episode had appeared to pass, leaving Will exhausted and pliable, desperate for aftercare that he had never been granted. With the hand on his nape Hannibal guided Will’s head out from where he had buried it, tilting it back until he was met with glazed and swollen eyes. The bottomless ocean captured behind dried tears and long lashes.

“I’m going to pick you up now Will and bring you into the bathroom, is that okay?”

There was no answer, only the rapid movement of Will’s eyes as he studied Hannibal’s face, never meeting his gaze again. Hannibal took it as a yes and shifted their position so one of his arms was in the crook of the boy’s knees and the other against his back. There was no flinch from Will but Hannibal didn’t miss the way the boy's toes curled, his curiosity now thoroughly piqued at what laid beneath the thin material of the oversized shirt.

Hannibal stood, shocked at how little Will weighed, and carried him into the ensuite bathroom. He sat the boy on the cool granite of the countertop and stepped back, a chance to fully take in the extent of damage the ptsd episode had caused. Thin and bloody scratches ran the length of Will's calves, which would need to be disinfected, while his face was blotchy and his eyes swollen. A cherub dragged through hell, but no longer, not with Hannibal as his new god.

"You were quite panicked Will." Hannibal knelt and opened the cabinets beneath the sink to retrieve the small medical kit. "I know you do not wish to talk just yet but if you feel so inclined I would never punish you for your words, if that is a worry you might be harboring."

He placed the kit on the counter and faced Will, who's head was bowed, curls hiding his flushed beauty. The boy's hands were gripping the edge of the counter as he continued to tremble, something Hannibal began to wonder was permanent. Maybe nerve damage or severe anxiety.

Hannibal took Will's right leg by the ankle and the boy jerked, his knuckles beginning to whiten. "I'm going to clean these scratches now, I would hate to see you get an infection."

With a dampened rag Hannibal dabbed at the already dried blood, taking care to not hurt the boy unnecessarily. They were not deep, which meant they would not scar but scab over at most. Hannibal moved to his left leg and that's when it occurred to him, Will's legs were hairless. A smile threatened to spread across his lips but he suppressed it. A thirty year old man would not be naturally hairless which meant that he had undergone laser hair removal in his past, something Hannibal found he was not opposed to. Damage he was quite appreciative of.

"Why did you buy me?"

The scratchy voice startled Hannibal and he looked up to briefly catch the blue of Will's shaking eyes. Hannibal tilted his head, realizing also that they hadn't lasered off the boy's facial hair, how curious.

"I found you appealing, is that not why you were purchased before?" Hannibal asked as he stood, tossing the dirtied rag into the sink.

Will's breath stuttered, obvious that his past was an extremely sensitive topic. "When I was young…yes…nobody wants me now."

Hannibal smiled, oh how modest his boy was being, unknowing of the potential he truly held. "I wanted you."

"They were going to kill me if you hadn't bought me," Will's voice was soft, nearly too quiet for Hannibal to hear. "I…I wish you hadn't."

Hannibal hummed and imagined his future if he had never met Will, imagined the world with his absence, it was a disappointing and dull thought. "Are you suicidal Will?"

Will glanced up from beneath his curls, a nearly unnoticeable movement. “Would it… wouldn’t it be justifiable if I was?”

“Yes it would be, I would presume that most people in your situation struggle with suicidal ideation and self harm.”

“And what would my situation be?” Will’s voice was sharp, repressed anger hidden in his words.

Hannibal knelt once again, ointment from the medical kit in hand. He looked up, catching a glimpse of fury in those ocean eyes. “Sex trafficking of course.”

Will didn’t react or if he did it was too minuscule for Hannibal to notice as he treated the scratches. Hannibal imagined that Will had never had anyone so blatantly admit to what his life was, had been for the past fourteen years. He hoped it was cathartic in a way for Will to have it put out in the open, that Hannibal was not here to act like the boy had wandered into his home on his own.

“What do you want with me?” Will finally whispered.

Hannibal stood once again and packed away the kit, deciding at the last minute to leave it out, a hunch he would be needing it frequently. “I see potential in you Will.”

“Potential to fuck me.”

Hannibal raised his brows at such crude language coming from a previously mute boy, he was already becoming bold. “I did not purchase you for sexual reasons, if that is what you’re anticipating.”

Will’s head raised and their eyes met, bourbon clashing with ocean waves. Will’s gaze narrowed and Hannibal smiled, the boy was attempting to read him, to find lies hidden in his words, which he would see none of.

“I don’t understand,” he admitted.

Hannibal reached up and tucked a curl behind Will’s ear. The boy flinched and dropped his eyes to Hannibal’s chin. “You will dear boy, in time you will.”

Will nodded and Hannibal watched as the boy closed in on himself, shutting down now that his most burning questions had been answered. It was disappointing, for Hannibal knew he would never tire of hearing Will’s voice, but the boy needed time. He was already making astronomical progress for the first day by speaking full sentences when Hannibal had expected nods and one word answers.

Hannibal took a few steps back, finding himself once again admiring the prize he had won and anticipating just how perfect he’d look when he was done. “You have been perfect so far Will but now I’d like you to stand and undress, I’m going to bathe you.”

Chapter 3

“You have been perfect so far Will but now I’d like you to stand and undress, I’m going to bathe you.”

Will blinked and the grip he had on the edge of the countertop tightened till it hurt, the stone digging into the flesh of his palms. The man had said he wasn't purchased for sex but Will found that hard to believe. If not for sex than it had to be for something far worse.

“Unless you are not comfortable? Then I will leave you to wash yourself,” the man said. “But I will admit I’m hesitant to leave you alone after what had just occurred.”

A shiver overtook Will’s body, chilling his blood and leaving him feeling sick. Having to undress in front of prying eyes was nothing new to Will, the majority of his life he had spent forcibly naked, but having the option of independence dangled before him was almost too tempting to pass up. Almost.

Will slid off from the counter top and when his feet hit the tile floor the room darkened, stars dancing in his vision. A hand grabbed his forearm, steadying him until his vision cleared. But before Will had the chance to jerk away from the touch the hand was gone, the man putting space between them once again.

“I will require you to eat when we are done here as well, you are far too weak, when was your last meal?”

The memory of the full tray of specially prepared food struck Will and he frowned, it had gone to waste due to his instability. He deserved punishment, if not now than soon. “I…I don’t remember.”

The man clicked his tongue, the sound echoing in the silence of the pristine bathroom. “That is dangerous Will, I can assure you that you will never go hungry here.”

Will scoffed and his eyes widened, hoping that the man hadn’t heard the sound. If he had he made no move to discipline Will, simply stood with his hands folded behind his back. Waiting for what Will remembered was for him to undress. The man had seen him naked already, a whole theater of rich snobs had seen him naked in fact, but somehow now it was different. It was always different when they were finally alone.

The ratty t-shirt fell to the tile floor and Will couldn’t stop himself from hunching, closing in on himself despite knowing it did nothing to hide the shame of the scars that his skin had collected. Next were the too big boxer shorts, which had been hanging loosely around the juts of his hipbones anyway, waiting to be ripped from his legs for easy access. The urge to cover himself had his arms jerking at his side but he resisted, they always wanted to see, he was made to be seen.

“Were you given laser hair removal?” The man asked.

Blush burned the apples of Will's cheeks, the man was extremely perceptive. "Y-yes."

"I see, why not remove your facial hair?"

Will shrugged and he clenched his fists at his sides, squeezing his thumbs in the grip. The idea of losing his facial hair leaving him feeling more than naked. "Didn't have it when I was taken…guess they forgot."

The man hummed and stepped away to rest on the edge of the tub. "It suits you, I do not wish to have it removed, only cleaned up."

It was as if a weight was lifted from Will's shoulders and he found himself watching the man as he filled the tub. Of course the man felt his stare and glanced at Will, offering a small smile before refocusing on his task. Again Will's face heated, unable to remember a time when someone had offered him an innocent gesture like a smile.

"You may get in now Will."

Will moved as quickly as his wobbly legs could carry him, nearly slipping as he stepped into the smooth porcelain of the clawfoot tub. The water was hot but not scalding, a perfect temperature that had the seemingly forever tense muscles in Will's body loosening. He leaned back, until his back kissed the tub and he had to stop himself from shying away from the soreness that greeted him in the position.

"Do you have open wounds on your back?" The man asked, causing Will to flinch and his eyes to fly open, he had forgotten he wasn't alone.

"N-no," he whispered.

The man walked away from the tub and opened a door to what Will assumed was a storage closet. "You seem to be in pain whenever your back is touched," the man observed, still facing away from Will. "I used to be a surgeon in my lifetime, soon I'd like to do a physical exam to make sure you don't have any life threatening injuries."

Will found he wanted to smile, he had been correct in his assumption, it had almost been too easy. "What do you do now?" He found himself asking before he could stop himself, curiosity sure to kill the cat.

Finally the man turned, revealing an armful of what looked like fancy soaps, scrubs, and cloths. "I am a practicing psychiatrist at the moment," he answered, completely unbothered by the question.

Ah, Will nodded, it all made sense now. Medical and mental knowledge, the man was the complete psychopath package. Lucky him.

The soaps and scrubs were set on the floor as the man knelt at the side of the tub, the cloth the only thing still in his hand. "Please wet your hair."

Will blinked and memories flooded his mind of being held underneath the water until his lungs spasmed and water replaced air. Of being forced so hard and fast into the basin of the

sink that his nose and teeth had cracked against the stainless steel, blood swirling along with his panic in the water. The back of his head ached with the phantom grip in his hair while his breathing had quickened, desperate for air that he already had.

“Will?”

Another blink and Will glanced at the man, at his chin, he had ignored an order. And such a simple one at that.

“Will where did you go?” The man’s voice was calm, soft.

Will straightened, lifting himself from his resting position against the tub to ready himself for the dip beneath the water. Because how else was he to wet the mess of curls he had accumulated over time?

“You are apprehensive, tell me, is it for fear of me drowning you?”

“Don’t know,” Will whispered. “Haven’t learned your pathology yet.”

The man sniffed and Will’s eyes widened, the man had laughed. Either at Will’s own expense for future punishments to come or he had somehow found the bluntness of his comment… humorous.

“That is true but you had years to learn others,” the man observed. “So not fearful of me but of acts committed by monsters of the past.”

Will shivered and with a sudden boldness he raised his eyes from the water to stare into the man’s. They were bottomless pits that unlike others remained closed off, offering only what they wanted and nothing more.

“You say that as if you will not ultimately join my collection of monsters.”

The man smiled, the crowsfeet at the corners of his eyes deepening into something eerily handsome that had Will turning away.

“Like you said, you have yet to learn my pathology so there is no way to know, I guess we’ll have to wait and see,” he said and dipped the cloth into the water, causing Will to flinch. “Won’t we Will?”

Will nodded, his muscles so incredibly tense that he was worried they’d snap beneath his skin. Like a fraying rope stretched too far, unraveling by the second, with the man beside him holding a knife to the threads.

“Tilt your head back, I will not force you to do something that causes you panic,” the man reassured as he held up the dripping cloth.

Baring his neck to the man was less than comforting and Will found himself caught between two evils, forced to decide which was the lesser. To trust the man he had known for less than twenty-four hours or to trust himself that he wouldn’t dive head first into the throes of

another panic attack by simply submerging his head. He sighed and his eyelids fluttered closed as he tilted his head back, he trusted no-one.

A strong hand cupped the back of Will's neck, supporting his weight entirely, while the other hand brought the cloth down his scalp. Soaked with enough water that it wet his curls easily while avoiding his face, they were measured movements, maybe even caring if Will squinted hard enough.

"I would like to trim your hair, if you are comfortable with that?"

Will knew he was meant to answer, to agree because it was a rhetorical question, but he was too tense. His teeth clenched so hard that he worried they would be ground to dust and his jaw practically welded shut. The hand cupping Will's skull gave a slight squeeze before beginning a soft massage, working at the hinge of his neck.

"You need not answer now, I am a very patient man Will," the man whispered and against himself Will found comfort in the soft spoken words.

A man willing to wait. A man willing to wait for consent…from Will. "Okay." He softened against the skilled hand at the base of his skull as it worked the tension from his bones. "Thank you."

The man's hand stilled briefly before resuming, such a minuscule action that anyone else would have never noticed it, but Will wasn't anyone.

"Of course Will, now I'm going to wash your hair so you may tilt your head up if you'd like."

Will shrugged, unused to being given so many choices that didn't end in pain or humiliation at his own expense. "Uh whatever is easier."

Hannibal hummed and the hand left his skull. "I will rephrase myself then, please Will tilt your head upwards for me."

Will's eyes opened and he bit at his forever bruised bottom lip. The man understood so well already, so easily, that Will worried for a second if he had been saying his thoughts aloud. Was he really so predictable that the man was already morphing his words to fit to him? Or was it the more likely answer, that this wasn't the man's first time purchasing from an auction, and this was his polite way of saying that all damaged minds were the same. Will couldn't decide which option he hated more.

Slowly Will righted his posture, sitting straight while keeping his eyes downcast. Focused on the way the water warped his legs and feet, that maybe if he stared long enough they'd remain that way. Except he didn't need the unsteady surface of bathwater to remind himself that he was warped, a man forever stuck before a funhouse mirror. Forced to never see himself for who he truly was, forced to believe what others showed him to be, a caricature.

The man must've uncapped one of the shampoo bottles because hints of something citrus and woody reached his nose before hands were upon him again. He worked the shampoo into a

lather before slowing to instead massage at Will's tender scalp, something he never thought he'd find himself practically purring at.

It was such a startling contrast to have his hair touched so delicately, to have any part of himself handled with care, that Will felt the tears wetting his cheeks before he could stop them. He wanted to be embarrassed, a part of him was, but if this man's goal was to pamper him before ultimately ending his life in the most gruesome way possible; then so be it.

"You are crying, am I hurting you?" The hands stopped and Will's eyes flew open, only to find bottomless eyes staring right back.

"N-no…you're not." The desire to add 'please don't stop' sat heavy on Will's tongue but he refrained. He must be content with what little was given to him or it would be taken away.

The man smiled and asked no further questions, simply resumed his massage that had Will's eyes fluttering closed against his command. He could picture it though, if he allowed himself, the many ways in how the man could kill him right at that moment.

Some slight force and he could easily be submerged. Held down by his head as his wet hands scrambled for purchase on the rounded edges of the porcelain tub. Never finding it but struggling anyway until finally instinct overtook survival and he inhaled. Death by drowning.

But if the man found himself the more violent type he could easily hold Will by the hair, a fistful of the curls, and waited until he reached back in a panic only to slam his face forward. Into the pristine smoothness of the bathtub, over and over again, until Will's hands fell from where he was attempting to wrestle the man's grip loose and his body sagged in the bloody water. Death by blunt force trauma.

Or if the man truly wanted to surprise Will he could stand, bringing Will with him and throwing him out of the tranquil waters onto the unforgiving hardness of tile. Will would be disoriented, naked, wet, vulnerable. Everything a man looked for in the perfect pet. And this would overwhelm the man, for he had never seen such perfection, which meant it would need to be snuffed out. By his hands obviously. So the man would straddle Will and he wouldn't try to fight back because it was useless. But he would panic as strong hands wrapped around his throat like a snake, squeezing and squeezing until Will was sure his eyes would burst from his head before anything else. Of course that wouldn't happen and again his body would fall limp, this time beneath the weight of the man. Death by strangulation.

Neither scenario sounded appealing but it wasn't up to Will, nothing ever was.

"Okay, you may stand now, we are finished."

Will blinked, eyes wide and staring up at the man who now towered above him. His mouth fell open, meaning to ask a question but the words stumbled and instead he found his eyes bouncing around the room. To gather his bearings, to remind himself that he hadn't been killed in all those heinous ways. No. He was alive and apparently clean.

"You seem confused Will, are you okay?"

“I…you’re done?”

The man tilted his head to the side, seemingly just as confused as Will. “Yes, I rinsed your hair before moving on to clean your body, do you not remember?”

Will’s brows furrowed as he shook his head. He hadn’t thought he lost time, wasn’t expecting to, fantasies of his own demise usually never led to that. It was normally…the other way around, with roles reversed and Will the victor that had his mind slipping from reality. This was odd, disorienting, even for his own standards.

“You must of fallen into a dissociative state,” the man explained, his voice once again breaking Will from his never ending thoughts. “Because your eyes were open, a facade of presence.”

“Okay.” Will didn’t want to discuss it further. He was used to his mind wandering, it had been a coping mechanism he had picked up years ago from when he was first taken. It was the context of the wandering thoughts that had him disturbed.

“Do you often dissociate Will?”

Will didn’t answer, suddenly too exhausted to even think of producing words. He cringed, the water around him was lukewarm at best now and his skin had already wrinkled into a pruny mess. He wanted out, which now was what he realized the man had instructed him to do minutes ago.

Acting on autopilot Will stood and again his vision darkened, tv static dancing in his eyes, and again the man reached out to steady him. Except this time the touch lingered, helping Will to step out of the tub and onto shaky, wet feet. The cool air of the bathroom had Will shivering but the discomfort was brief, because the next thing he knew a plush towel was being draped over his shoulders. It enveloped Will like he expected a hug to, warm and slightly heavy, protecting him

The man stepped in front of Will, a barely there smile adorning his features as his eyes travelled Will’s body, which was now mostly swallowed by the towel.

“When you are ready I do hope you find that you can confide in me about where your mind wanders to, I am so very curious,” the man said, with such sincerity it had Will nodding unconsciously. The smile grew and the man rubbed his hands up and down Will’s towel covered biceps. “Now, please follow me.”

There was no waiting for confirmation that Will would follow the order, the man confident enough that he turned his back and exited the room, with Will trailing a few steps behind. The man opened a second door in the room which Will assumed to be a closet, it wasn’t very full, obviously some extra clothing that the man hadn’t worn as frequently. Will’s heart stuttered in his chest at the idea of wearing clothes once worn by the man, most preferred him naked, but this man was not most.

“I apologize for the fit of the clothes.” The man plucked a pair of what looked like sweatpants from a neatly folded pile on a shelf. “They will be big but I will have a proper

wardrobe for you as soon as possible."

Will balked, the man planned on buying him clothing, and not just a few items; a wardrobe. Maybe he was mistaken, maybe the man's ultimate end goal was not to kill him. He shifted on his bare feet, pulling the towel tighter around his body. The sudden possibility that death wasn't imminent leaving Will anxious, there were options now, unknowns, and he didn't like that. This man was unpredictable, more so than he's ever seen before, and that terrified him.

The man walked past Will, who had been hovering in the doorway, and set a pile of neatly folded clothes onto the bed. Beside the tray of forgotten food, which was entirely inedible now.

"If you are comfortable with it I'd like to examine you closer for injuries before you dress," the man's words had the lilt of a question. Asking for consent once again.

Will shrugged, he had gotten exams before, if you could even call them that. Performed by unqualified physicians who had no doubt lost their license to practice years ago. More concerned with taking advantage than healing, leaving Will to scar instead.

"I imagine you have suffered many injuries in your lifetime," the man commented. "I only want to try and ease what pain I can from your past, starting with the physical."

Will's brows furrowed but he didn't meet the man's eyes, despite knowing they were unflinchingly upon him. "You got some kind of savior complex?"

"No," he answered without hesitation.

"Then why…why do and say these things?"

The man stepped closer, so socked feet could be seen where Will stared at the floor. "You are beyond saving Will, there is no reversing the damage that has been done to you."

Tears pricked the corners of Will's eyes, sharp and burning, while a tight smile tugged at the corners of his lips. Bitter and hateful for having the reality of his situation said with such nonchalance, such indifference.

"So why am I here then?" Will whispered around the lump forming in his throat. "Why purchase me if I'm so irredeemable?"

Another step and the man was too close, nearly toe to toe with Will. His breath stuttered in his lungs as fingers gripped his chin, forcing his head up, forcing him to look. To see. Except he wouldn't, not yet, and instead Will focused on the tip of the man's ear.

"Like I said dear boy, you will have to wait and see."

Will swallowed and before he could jerk his head from the touch it was already gone, the man sliding away from him as if he had never been there at all. The scenarios from earlier in the bathroom flashed in Will's mind but this time they were different. The roles were not reversed like usual but this time he fought, on equal footing with the man, and won.

Will blinked away the tears, some still managing to wet his cheeks that he ignored. He dropped the towel he had been gripping so tightly he was surprised he hadn't torn it, the fabric pooling around his feet. He stared at the man, straight through him. Not seeing but mimicking. "Okay, I can be a patient man too."

Chapter 4

Hannibal had to stop his smile from growing too wide, too predatory, as he stared at the beautiful creature before him. Already so willing to play along, Will's mind more exquisite than he could've ever hoped for. It was only their first day together and already Hannibal had made so much progress, peaked at some of the darkness festering beneath Will's skin, it was intoxicating. Leaving him nearly drunk on the boy.

"Then I am glad we are on the same page, please Will come a bit closer."

Like a candle being snuffed out Will's confidence vanished. His stormy eyes dropped back to the floor while his body hunched in on itself to appear smaller, lesser. One step forward, two steps back. Hannibal could still work with it.

On wobbly legs Will moved closer so they were merely an arms length away. Being this close Hannibal could smell the soaps he had used to bathe him, could see the different shades of brown that made up the halo of curls he wore atop his head. The boy was art in human form and Hannibal would make sure to treat him as such.

"Do I have permission to touch you?" Hannibal asked.

Will's eyes flickered up, a movement bred out of shock. The boy was not used to being asked for consent and Hannibal was going to be sure to change that, in order to earn what little trust Will had left to give.

"Most people…they would have just done it already," Will mumbled.

Hannibal clicked his tongue and decided last minute to retrieve gloves from the medical kit, if only to help Will separate a clinical touch from that of a sexual one.

"Well Will like we have previously established I am not most people." He pulled the gloves on, snapping the wrist bands to ensure a snug fit. "And I do not wish to touch you inappropriately, merely a physical exam like I mentioned earlier."

Will nodded and the tension in his shoulders lessened. Years of conditioning to have his body used for pleasure, Hannibal had to stop himself from baring his teeth at the thought of filthy hands upon what was his.

"I need verbal consent Will, it will be a requirement from now on," he explained, still not touching the boy.

The tension returned and Will's hands fidgeted at his sides. "O-okay."

Hannibal smiled, he would pressure the boy for proper communication another time. "That was very good Will, now I'd like you to hold your arms out to your sides, I'm going to check your ribs."

It was such a subtle movement, one that would've gone completely unnoticed, if Hannibal hadn't been looking for it. The slight hitch in Will's breath at being praised. Confirming another one of Hannibal's hypotheses and adding yet another way to garner Will's fragile trust.

Will's arms came up and Hannibal hummed, his brows furrowing as he took in the sight of the too thin boy. With gloved hands he prodded at Will's prominent ribcage and in mere seconds found some abnormalities, something he had expected.

Hannibal looked up at the boy, briefly catching the ocean of his eyes before they were jerking away. "Were you aware you suffered from broken ribs in the past?"

"I…I don't know…I always thought it was possible."

Moving to the back of Will was no different, if anything it was worse. Thin scars littered his skin and Hannibal didn't even need to feel the ribs to notice the damage, which was fairly fresh.

"I think I have discovered the reason for your back pain," Hannibal announced as he felt along the slightly disfigured rib, earning flinches from the boy. "You are suffering from a recent break, maybe a fracture."

Will made a sound, close to a whine, as the fidgeting of his hands increased. His bitten down nails clawing at the skin on the sides of his fingers, a habit Hannibal would have to put a stop to, sooner rather than later.

"It's nothing life threatening or untreatable, if that is what's causing your distress."

"I…I know…not that," Will whispered. "I've had worse."

Hannibal hummed and made his way back to Will's front. "I would greatly appreciate if you shared those injuries with me, it would help to move this process along faster."

Another shift of the ocean eyes but this time they lingered on Hannibal, one of the boy's poorly masked attempts at reading him. A waste of both their time was what he hoped Will would soon realize.

"Broken ribs, dislocated elbow and shoulder, multiple concussions, broken fingers, and probably a laundry list of other things I was too beat up to notice." Will's voice was dry, detached, separated from the trauma.

If Will was to heal properly he would eventually need to face his demons head on, with Hannibal standing by his side. Never alone again.

"I see, your body has healed fairly well for all things considered." Hannibal prodded at the boy's joints, confirming the claims of past dislocation. "You are a very resilient person."

"Against my will."

Hannibal continued to examine, bypassing his desire for eye contact to instead give Will the semblance of privacy to speak his thoughts. “You were healed against your will? Did you wish to remain injured?”

“My body fought to survive…not my mind.”

“Do you believe your mind to be beyond healing? Permanently damaged?”

Will shifted, choosing his words, deciding if he had already shared too much. Finally he spoke. “Do you believe you can fix it?”

Hannibal smirked, clever boy. “Like I said Will, I do not wish to fix you, there is no fixing what has been done to you, but I’d still like to help—” he stood straight and stepped away from the boy, closer to the bed where the tray and clothes sat—“the rest is simply up to you. I am finished now so you may dress.”

Will startled as if he had been somewhere else before his body seemed to move on autopilot, shuffling up to the bed and grabbing at the pile of clothes with shaky hands. He held the black boxer briefs, staring at them intently, his eyes tracing over the material as if committing them to memory.

Hannibal tilted his head to watch but refrained from speaking, not wanting to interrupt a moment that seemed to be sacred for the boy. Clothing must have been sparsely given out at the theater, seen as a privilege rather than a necessity.

The briefs were too big, baggy where they should have been tight and clinging to the pronounced juts of the boy’s hip bones. Will didn’t seem to mind of course and reached for the grey sweats next, his eyes rapidly taking in the item once again while his thumbs caressed the fabric. He slid them over his legs, nearly falling over as his balance was tested from lack of food. Like the briefs they were too big, even with the drawstring pulled tight it was obviously the boy was almost swimming in them.

Hannibal would have to acquire the boy’s measurements immediately. Ordering clothes that would fit his current malnourished form and for the weight he’d put on in the future from a proper diet. It would be a long journey to that day but Hannibal was willing to wait.

Lastly Will threw on the navy blue t-shirt, a few sizes too big to match the rest of the outfit. The color of the shirt brought out the blues in the boy’s eyes, enhancing hues that could only be found in the deepest depths of the ocean. It was mesmerizing and Hannibal found the need to commit the image to paper, even then he could never do the real thing justice.

“Perfect, now, would you prefer to eat with me or should I bring your lunch up to your room?” Hannibal asked, a part of him hoping the boy would choose to join him. A huge step forward in progress if he did.

Will’s eyes widened and his hands fisted the hem of the t-shirt. “This is my room?”

Hannibal nodded, his features softening. “Yes Will, there are many rooms for me to spare in this house, this one is now yours.”

Will's eyes took in the room, as if seeing it for the very first time, an overly observant habit. Bred from needing to be aware of ones surroundings at all times, or else be surprised by something unwanted.

"Thank you." Will's voice was soft, timid, and it had something dark twisting in the pit of Hannibal's gut.

The start of obsession, the twinge, he would never let this boy go.

"Of course Will, now will you be joining me downstairs?" A more direct approach, less a question and more an order, no other option for Will to choose but to agree.

And like Hannibal predicted the boy nodded, glittering blue eyes daring a glance as if worried he had chosen wrong. Poor thing. Hannibal smiled and took a step closer, hovering his hand at the small of Will's back. A touch he wouldn't feel but would still know it was there.

"Excellent, please follow me."

Hannibal led the boy out the room, into the hall, and down the stairs. Will was worriedly shaky in his steps, forcing Hannibal to hold his upper arm for balance. Which the boy didn't seem to mind, almost appearing thankful for the assistance, and Hannibal took note to test innocent physical contact whenever possible.

"Have a seat and I'll finish the preparations." Hannibal motioned to one of the barstools lining the kitchen island before moving to the fridge where a pot of broth was waiting.

"At the counter?"

Hannibal faced the boy, pot in hand, to see him staring wide eyed at the kitchen island. A deer caught in the headlights.

"Yes Will at the counter, we are equals here."

Will jerked as if he had been struck while his eyes blinked rapidly, a sign of disbelief, the boy had never been seen as more than a house pet. Hannibal watched as Will smoothed a hand over the leather seat of the barstool before shakily he climbed up onto it. He sat with a straight spine, hands folded neatly in his lap, and with his head bowed to avoid eye contact. To appear small yet alert, always ready for an order to be given.

"Thank you," the boy whispered.

Hannibal smiled as he placed the pot onto the stove for reheating. "Of course Will, am I correct in assuming this is the first time someone has seen you as equal?"

"Do you really have to ask?"

The flame of the stove flickered on and Hannibal removed the lid from the pot, a smile still pulling at his lips. The boy's wit was very amusing. "No I suppose I don't but I find myself curious nonetheless."

“I’d say…even before I was taken nobody saw me as an equal,” Will admitted softly.

Hannibal turned, briefly catching Will’s eyes before the boy dropped his head, his now clean curls bouncing with life; and the desire to run his fingers through them burned in Hannibal’s fingertips.

“Why is that Will?” Hannibal busied himself, realizing early on that the boy found speaking easier without direct attention.

“I don’t know…wasn’t well liked…didn’t have friends.”

The image of a younger and awkward Will materialized in Hannibal’s mind. Sitting alone at the lunch tables of school but not eating, no, he was poor and couldn’t afford it. Instead he would observe, absorb too much, and his peers would label him a freak.

“Sometimes…sometimes I wonder if they had even looked for me when I disappeared.”

I would look for you, is what Hannibal wanted to say to the boy. Wanted to tell the boy that he would travel to every corner of the world and take down anyone that stood in his way to get him back.

“It’s easier to just accept they didn’t…than have false hope.”

“You believe even your parents didn’t bother to search for you?” Hannibal asked as he stirred the simmering broth, his back to Will strictly for the boy’s comfort.

Will laughed, bitter and painful. “Parent…and no…I wouldn’t be surprised if he celebrated.”

An only child, motherless, with an abusive father. Hannibal attempted to piece together Will’s father in his mind. He wouldn’t look like Will, the boy would resemble his mother, which would leave his father’s heart sore every time he laid eyes on his child. The man probably drank, excessively, and worked a job that required manual labor and long hours. Something Will wouldn’t be interested in, leaving them separated even further, father and son that were basically strangers.

“Did you know your mother?” Hannibal removed the pot from the heat before taking two bowls from the cabinet.

“No…she wasn’t around…even when I was a baby.”

Hannibal nodded to himself as he ladled broth into both bowls. Will had never stood a chance but now, under Hannibal’s care, he could be reborn in the world that had previously discarded him like trash.

Finally Hannibal faced Will, the two bowls of broth held in his hands. Unlike last time Will kept his head up but his eyes were focused on the bowls, red rimmed from what Hannibal knew were held back tears.

“Bone broth with black silke chicken and star anises, what I had tried to serve you this morning,” Hannibal explained as he set Will’s bowl down in front of him along with a spoon.

Will took the spoon but made no move to eat. “Like chicken soup?” He mumbled.

Hannibal flicked his eyes up at the boy as he took a spoonful of his own broth. “I suppose yes.”

A whisper of a smile grazed Will’s lips but it was gone before Hannibal had a chance to savor it. Instead he watched as the boy raised the full spoon to his mouth, memorized the way his lips closed around the metal and how they bulged as he slid the utensil out. Hannibal’s eyes dropped to Will’s throat to see the boy’s Adam’s apple bob beneath his skin, swallowing what Hannibal had cooked for him.

“Is it to your liking Will?” He asked the boy, who seemed to be lost in his mind.

Will blinked and took another spoonful. “Yes, it’s very good…thank you.”

Hannibal hummed, content to allow his broth to go cold if it meant he could watch Will enjoy his cooking. “Eat slowly, your stomach is sensitive.”

The boy gave a jerky nod but otherwise never looked up from where he was hunched over the bowl. A protective stance to keep others away, or to keep others from taking what was his. Again images flooded Hannibal’s mind, this time of Will being thrown scraps as if he were a dog, only to have them taken by someone bigger and stronger. He wouldn’t fight, he had lost too many times already, so instead he would curl up in the corner. Tail tucked between his legs and stomach distending from hunger.

“You will be fed three proper meals everyday, either down here with me or in your room if you so choose, and if you find yourself hungry between meals all you need to do is ask and I will prepare you something to snack on. Do you understand Will?”

Will froze above the empty bowl and his eyes rose, slowly, to stare at Hannibal from beneath long lashes. All the fury of the ocean trapped in those eyes, trapped in one boy, now trapped by Hannibal. He nodded and Hannibal smiled.

“Good boy.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Warning for this chapter, there is a suicide attempt that is pretty graphic :(poor Will

The window was cool against Will's fingertips and he pressed his forehead to the glass. He was probably dirtying it but he didn't care, his stomach was churning and the cold was soothing. The dinner the man had prepared sat in his bloated stomach like a rock, a simple pasta dish yet his body fought to keep it down. Will knew realistically he could've told the man it was too much, that he felt sick and about ready to burst, but then the thought of the man ceasing the meals occurred to him and he swallowed the words. Withholding food was a punishment of lesser pain but greater consequence that he did not wish to endure any longer.

He wanted to look normal, healthy, and this man was willing to get him there.

"Would you like to go outside?"

The man's voice startled Will, causing him to nearly fall from where he was perched on the sill of his bedroom window. He watched the man from the corner of his eye, not fulling facing him but still aware, just in case he decided to stop lingering in the doorway.

"It's dark," he whispered, the heat of his breath fogging the glass.

"That is correct, does the dark bother you Will?"

It didn't used to was what Will wanted to say. To tell the man that nighttime had always been a comfort for him, awake when nobody else was, forgotten but not alone. Until they used the dark of nightfall against him, used his comfort against him, and now here he was. Thirty years old and scared like some foolish child. Instead he shrugged his shoulders and his stomach churned with more nausea.

"Were you taken at night?"

Another wave of nausea and suddenly his reflection faded from the window, leaving him in the dark. In that parking lot with the flickering streetlights above him. Cracked and pothole covered asphalt as if someone had stolen chunks from it. The white paint of the parking lines were barely visible, replaced by tire tracks from drunk teenagers pulling dangerous stunts. He blamed the tears, if he hadn't been crying then maybe he would've seen them. Would've heard them drive up behind him in that windowless van, what a cliche.

The arms wrapped around his middle and yanked, so hard that it hurt, and saliva pooled in his mouth. Except the tape never came next like he remembered, instead a warm hand pressed against his forehead and he looked up. Expecting to see the blurred faces of men that didn't

matter and the rusted roof of a van long gone but was instead met with haunting eyes. Deep and grounding in their vastness.

“Will are you here with me?” The man asked, the timber of his voice running through Will like warmed honey.

He nodded, unable to speak around the sickness lodged in his throat. He was going to vomit.

As if the man read his mind he began to move, placing his arms under Will’s knees and behind his back to lift him from the sill. The movement was jarring and Will found himself clinging to the man, burying his sweat damp face into the crook of his neck.

“I’m going to set you on the floor in front of the toilet, if you feel the need to vomit.”

The cold kiss of tile followed the man’s words, just like he had said, and Will leaned over the bowl of the toilet. Shivers wracked his body, followed by more saliva that he spit out before the dinner launched itself from his body. It was upsetting to see the food go to waste and frustrating to be reminded of just how weak he truly was. Unable to digest simple pasta, ungrateful of hand prepared food, deserving of nothing but scraps.

Tears stung Will’s eyes which he blamed on the vomit but he knew better, so did the man.

“I apologize Will, I allowed my eagerness to feed you compromise your well-being.”

Will choked around a sob and shook his head. “It…it’s…not…your fault.”

A hand brushed back Will’s hair, holding the curls back in a gentle grip. “Do not blame yourself for your body being unused to nurturing.”

Will buried his face in the crook of his elbow, desperate to hide the sobs shaking his body. “I…I’m sorry.”

The grip in Will’s hair tightened, forcing his head away from its hiding place.

“Will I need you to look at me,” the man ordered.

Will complied, eager to show the man that he could listen, could obey a simple command. That he didn’t need to be punished despite how badly his mind screamed for it.

The man’s gaze was soft, the complete opposite of what Will had expected. “I will not tolerate you apologizing for something that is beyond your control.”

“I’m—”

“Ah, what did I just say Will?” The man cut him off and carded his fingers through his curls.

Will sniffed and wiped at his tears with the back of his hand. His mouth tasted of stomach acid and bile. “To not apologize.”

“That is right, smart boy.” The man smoothed his thumb beneath Will’s eye, a smile grazing his lips. “Do you feel any better?”

The praise warmed Will’s chest where he thought his heart might be. He shifted on the hard tile, a blanket of nausea still draped over him but the urge to vomit no longer sat at the forefront. He nodded and the man stood, his hands outstretched.

“Let me help you brush your teeth then you may go to bed, does that sound okay?”

Will dropped his eyes to the floor and wrung his trembling hands together. Everything was wrong, a punishment was what he deserved, not kindness. Kindness came with conditions, ones that he would never be able to meet. Never had and never will.

“Will?”

“You should punish me,” he whispered.

Silence followed Will’s words. Deafening was the man’s absence of a response and it had his heart racing, his breath quickening, and his jaw tensing.

“What punishment do you believe you deserve?” The man asked.

Will’s mouth gaped around words he couldn’t find. The question was a familiar one but for once he found himself at a loss. He didn’t even know what the man liked. “I…I don’t…you could hit me.”

The man hummed, thoughtful. “Why should I hit you Will?”

Will grimaced at the question. Too many questions with too many answers he didn’t have; and the longer he sat on the hard tile, awaiting a punishment the man seemed firm on withholding, the stupider he felt.

An apology sat on his tongue but he clenched his teeth, swallowing the words. Finally he shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“I see.” Fingers gripped Will’s chin and his head was raised to meet bottomless eyes. “You don’t know because you did nothing wrong.”

Tears burned Will’s eyes that he didn’t have the strength to keep from falling. A single day he’s been with the man, barely one day and already he could feel it. The attachment building, the security he so desperately lacked all his life, and god was it dangerous. Painful. Lethal when it was finally taken away for good.

“Don’t cry dear boy, come, stand up.” The man held out his hands once again and Will took them, warmth colliding with the cold sweats of anxiety.

He was guided to the vanity where the man grabbed a glass cup sitting by the sink and filled it with water. It was handed to Will and his eyes found the man’s in his reflection.

“Rinse your mouth out, I do not want you going to bed with the taste of vomit,” the man instructed.

Will obeyed, swirling a gulp of the water in his mouth before spitting it out into the sink. The bitterness still lingered on his tastebuds but the idea of brushing his teeth physically drained him. Thankfully the man didn’t seem concerned with that and with a gentle hand placed against the small of his back he was led out of the bathroom.

“Sit, I will grab your sleepwear.”

The plush of the mattress sank beneath Will as he sat, the feathers of the duvet molding to his body. He watched the man as he moved about the walk-in closet. Every step placed with confidence, grace, poise. The man’s accent gave away that he was not American but his mannerisms hinted that he might’ve been part of an affluent family. Somewhere in Europe, maybe a smaller country, holding strong to its rural history.

Will straightened and he glanced at the window, his reflection staring back at him. He didn’t even know where he was now. Didn’t know what state or city, but from the roadsigns he had seen he was sure they were still in the united states.

“Where are we?” Will blurted out and immediately his shoulders tensed with regret. Awaiting a blow he knew realistically wouldn’t come, but that didn’t stop the phantom pain from alighting his nerves.

The man emerged from the closet, a neatly folded stack of clothes held in his hands and his brows raised with curiosity. “We are in your bedroom Will, are you feeling confused?”

Will chewed at his bottom lip, looking anywhere but at the man. “N-no s-sorry I…I meant what state are we in?”

The man’s tongue clicked as his lips parted slightly, understanding. “We are in Maryland, Baltimore to be exact.”

Maryland.

A heaviness fell over Will and he nodded. That was a long way from Louisiana.

“Not what you were expecting?” The man asked as he set the clothes beside Will on the bed.

Will opened his mouth to respond, as he should to a question being asked, but found himself speechless. When was the last time he had even been in Louisiana? Had they taken him from the state on the very first night? Covering their tracks by crossing state lines, removing him from anywhere he’d be recognized. Had he been in Maryland all these years?

No.

Will flinched when the cold of a metal cage kissed his skin, except when he looked behind him there was nothing there but the ornate headboard.

He had been in Virginia.

Louisiana, Virginia, and now Maryland. The rest was a mystery, gaps in his memory he would never recover, and maybe didn't want to.

"Where are you from Will?"

The man's voice was startling, but then again, everything was to Will. He glanced up at the man to see him standing patiently, hands folded in front of himself, unperturbed by Will's lack of presence.

"Louisiana," he answered.

"Can you recall what part?"

Will nodded, he could, with ease. "New Orleans."

"Ah, you've lost your accent over time I'm assuming."

"Guess that happens when you don't talk for years." Will grabbed from the pile of clothes next to him and held up a pair of black pajama pants. Maybe silk from the feel and look of them.

"What was your reason for going mute?" The man asked and held out his hand, an offer for help he knew Will wouldn't refuse.

Will took the hand and stood, steadying himself with the stability the man offered, like a boulder placed in the sea, unmoving. "Too many reasons," he whispered.

To his relief the man didn't push for an answer. Instead he unfolded the next item in the pile, revealing a knit maroon sweater. Will's fingers twitched at his side, itching to touch what looked like the softest sweater he's ever seen.

"It will be big on you, I hope you don't mind."

Will pulled off his shirt, more eager than he'd like to admit to throw on the red sweater. Like he imagined the knit material was soft, caressing his skin and swallowing his frame whole as he slid it on. If he wasn't so thin it probably wouldn't have been as noticeable, but with his current health he was nearly swimming in it. Next were the pants and like he expected they fit big as well, the drawstring pulled to its limit to accommodate the slimness of his waist.

"I will go out to purchase you clothes after work tomorrow," the man said and Will's eyes shot up to stare at him.

"Work?" He repeated. He was going to be left alone.

The man nodded. "Yes Will I'm afraid the weekend has come to an end but I trust you'll be okay here by yourself."

Memories of chains and collars, cages and dark locked rooms rushed Will's mind. So much at once that he felt winded by it, nearly knocked off his feet. The man didn't seem like the type to use collars and leashes to keep him in place but then again, he's been wrong before. He

imagined himself being locked in the room for the whole day, which wouldn't be horrible, comfortable even. He had experienced far worse things.

"I will not be locking you up, if that is what you're thinking."

Again Will's eyes shot up to stare at the man, disbelieving. "Why not?"

You're not worried I'll escape? Is what Will wanted to say but the thought of escaping hadn't even crossed his own mind until now; there was no reason to plant the idea in the man's.

The man didn't answer as he gathered the clothes Will had changed out of and left to toss them in the hamper that lived in the bathroom. When he returned there was a slight grin to his lips, the skin around his eyes wrinkled.

"You can join me tomorrow if you'd like?"

"To your work?" Will balked, thoroughly shocked. Nobody had ever taken him outside whatever prison they had built for him.

The man nodded. "Yes Will, I have my own private practice and office but I will warn you that you'd come in contact with quite a few people."

It was intriguing, the idea of going somewhere new, of playing pretend. But that intrigue was crushed almost as quickly as it bloomed at the thought of interacting as if he were normal. As if he wasn't some play thing the good doctor had bought in a dimly lit, long since abandoned theater. No. People would ask questions with answers Will didn't have, and that was a recipe for utter disaster and a panic attack.

"I…I'd rather not," he whispered and the phantom pain of a slap rang across his cheek for saying no.

In response the man simply nodded and walked around to the side of the bed, pulling back the blankets for Will as if he were a child. It should've embarrassed him but Will was long past feeling shame for the things done to him.

He crawled into the bed, his bones nearly sighing with relief, and watched as the man walked to the door. The light switch was flicked off, bathing the room in suffocating darkness, the only light coming from the open doorway the man lingered in.

"Goodnight Will," the man said.

"Goodnight."

The door clicked shut and Will was alone. It wasn't an unusual occurrence, he had spent the majority of his life alone. Even the times when he was surrounded by others he was alone, trapped in his own cage, in his own mind. Being alone was exactly what got him there, in a strange man's house, in his even stranger bed. All that loneliness leading him up to that very moment, how anticlimactic.

He turned onto his side, an attempt to relieve the ache in his back, but was instead rewarded with cartwheels in his stomach. The food still fighting to be rejected from his body, not meant to survive, unable to be nourished. Destined to wither away.

The blankets were warm, the duvet and sateen sheet caressing his body in a perfect coffin. He couldn't remember the last time he had slept in a bed. Even reaching far back into his childhood the so-called bed in his room was far from that, a duct taped air mattress the more accurate name.

His eyelids fluttered, threatening to close against the weight of his exhaustion. Yearning for a type of rest that he knew could only be granted in death. And just like that, the dark, recurrent thought crossed his mind then…of taking his own life.

It wouldn't be the first time he had tried (try being the keyword) and with every attempt being an embarrassing failure. Pulled back from the dead by the strong arm of god, or more likely rejected from hell by the devil himself. Too precious to let go but not enough to keep alive, forever stuck in a limbo.

Will sat up, suffocating beneath the weight of his thoughts, and stared at the closed bathroom door lingering ominously from across the room. Had the man considered this train of thinking already and took the proper precautions; removing anything harmful from the bathroom, or had he been naive of Will's own self destruction? There was only one way to find out.

Silently Will slid from the bed, the little voice in his head telling him he wasn't allowed to move. With his arms wrapped around his middle he shuffled to the door, resting his hand on the cool metal of the knob. Not turning it, just feeling, imagining.

He'd check beneath the vanity first. In the cabinets for anything sharp, no chemicals, maybe medications. If there was nothing then he'd check the closet where the fancy soaps lived, hoping to at least find a shaving razor he could dismantle. If found, he'd climb into the bathtub, if only to make cleanup easier for the man. Once comfortable he'd run the razor along his wrists, long vertical drags with enough pressure to pass through the many layers of skin. Until so much blood coated him that it would be nearly impossible to see when the cut began and ended. Then he'd lean his head back, close his eyes, and wade into the quiet of the stream. Finally quiet, peaceful; that was his design.

The lights in the bathroom were too bright and Will's eyes watered as he crouched before the vanity cabinets. He wiped the reactionary tears before opening them, peering into the storage space that he knew he wasn't supposed to see. There wasn't much. A few neatly folded towels, what looked like a hand soap, and a sleek black case. Will grabbed the case, it was leather and decent in weight, with a zipper running along the side. With shaky hands he opened it, revealing a undoubtedly expensive folded straight razor.

The handle was polished wood, the grain a rich brown that stood out starkly against the reddish wood. It was beautiful, and for a second Will regretted the idea of tainting it with something as impure as his own blood. It flicked open smoothly, well oiled and unaffected by however long it had sat in its case. The blade glinted in the light, perfectly sharpened, maybe even unused.

Will had never used a straight razor personally but he had seen his fair share, they always terrified him. The thought of placing an unguarded blade to one's neck, one wrong move and you could leave yourself permanently scarred. Not like a new scar would be even noticeable, simply a new tally to carve into the wall of his collection.

He stood, blade in hand, and caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror. His hair was longer than he thought, resting on his shoulders, and curlier than he remembered. Years of grease and dirt hiding the natural volume. The red sweater stood out starkly against the paleness of his skin, the knit material practically swallowing him whole. He would take it off beforehand, it was too nice to ruin.

The image of himself in the mirror, blade in hand, was a different one than he was used to seeing. If he squinted hard enough he almost looked…powerful. No longer the scared boy that had been kidnapped off the streets all those years ago, but a man willing to do whatever it takes to secure his freedom. He considered then if maybe there was another way. That maybe the bedroom door wasn't locked and he could creep into the hallway, silent like the dead as he hunted for the man's room. And maybe the man's door wouldn't be locked either and he could turn the knob with the utmost care, the hinges never making a sound. There he would slide into the darkened room with grace, eyes never leaving the form of the sleeping man, blissfully unaware of the power Will truly held.

An emotion would waft over him as he stood at the man's bedside, like a cool breeze, but it wouldn't be guilt or uncertainty. Not even remorse. It would be hard to name, something he hadn't felt in years, gratitude. A thankfulness to the man for his ignorance, his naïvety, for allowing him to become free.

Once the emotion passed, settled in his blood stream, then he'd slit the man's throat. A clean cut from one side to the other, deep enough to kill, long enough to end things quickly. And he'd watch, as the man's eyes flew open but they wouldn't be panicked, and he wouldn't struggle. They would simply see each other until the fire drained from the smoldering irises of the man's eyes.

That was his design.

Will jerked back from the mirror and the straight razor slipped from his hand, clattering loudly to the floor. He stared at it, unblinking and muscles rigid beneath his skin. Waiting for the telltale sound of heavy footsteps and doors being swung open on aged hinges.

Except it never came and slowly Will knelt to grab the razor. It burned cold in his palm and he set it down carefully on the granite vanity, body still tense with the possibility of being caught. He pulled the sweater off, placing it neatly folded beside the razor while avoiding the mirror. The permanent catalogue of his trauma on his body was not something he wanted to look at, even if it was for the last time. Grabbing the razor again he climbed into the bathtub, the porcelain kissing his bare skin with cold, shocking lips. It was off putting and he almost considered putting the sweater back on, if only to be comfortable in his final moments.

He examined the blade again, watching the way the light glinted from it, how he could nearly see his reflection. The polished steel catching the blues of his eyes, the darkness beneath them, the bruising around them. With one arm resting on the edge of the tub, palm upwards,

he placed the tip of the blade to his skin. Just below his palm, the center of his wrist, where all the pretty veins fought to pump blood through his system.

With a shaky drag of his hand the blade was pushed and pulled, separating his skin to let forth a flood of red. Darker than he expected and warm as it coated his arm. The pain quickly became unbearable and he lifted the blade, stopping midway in his forearm, the cut a good four inches long.

The air burned where it reached into his body, layers of flesh never meant to be exposed. Flayed open in more ways than one. It stung to move as he shakily switched the razor to the other hand, careful not to drop it as his fingers slicked with blood. As he reached across himself blood dripped from the wound and decorated his torso in perfect red rivulets.

The color reminding him of the sweater, which still sat neatly folded, untainted.

With less pressure he mirrored the cut on his right arm, stopping slightly short when the slide of the blood made holding the razor nearly impossible. It fell from his hand onto the floor but this time the clatter was muffled, as if someone had stuffed cotton into his ears when he wasn't looking.

He kept his arms up on the edges of the tub and watched as the blood cut rivers down the sides of the pristine porcelain.

The urge to panic was mounting. The thrum of his pulse quickening, beating against the thin skin of his neck and in the exposed veins of his wrist.

Survival instincts were kicking in. The animal part of Will's brain screaming at him to cover the wounds, stop the bleeding, cry for help. He blinked and leaned his head back against the tub, focusing on keeping his breathing steady. On tamping down the fear, the restlessness, the need for his body to combat what he had done to himself.

"Oh Will."

At the sound of his name Will jerked upwards, arms slipping down from the edges of the tub to press against his sides. The man stood in the doorway of the bathroom, his face impassive and arms crossed over his chest, posture almost bored. As if he had been expecting this yet was hoping the outcome to be different.

The man shook his head and his tongue clicked as his lips parted. "What have you done to yourself?"

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> I proofread this shit on my break during work so I apologize if this chapter is subpar lol also thank you for the lovely comments! I read and appreciate every single one of them!

Hannibal committed the image before him to the deepest confines of his memory palace. The stark contrast of the darkness of Will's blood against the paleness of his skin. Nearly dissolving into the white of the porcelain, his head of chocolate curls the only thing stopping him from disappearing. He framed the image in gold before hanging it in the wing that has been steadily morphing into Will's very own.

"Oh Will," he sighed.

At the sound of his name Will's entire body gave a reaction. His arms falling away from the sides of the tub, smearing the blood along the porcelain and staining his perfectly marred skin. His eyes were wide yet from where Hannibal stood he could already see the beginnings of blood loss. The hazy and dim look to the usually violent gaze.

Hannibal shook his head. "What have you done to yourself?"

Will blinked, his mouth gaping. "I…I don't know."

Hannibal unfolded his arms and crossed the room to stand at the side of the tub. He knelt, reaching in to lift one of Will's stained, split open arms. The boy flinched but the movement was sluggish, the second stage of blood loss taking affect faster than expected in his malnourished state.

The cuts were fairly deep. Deep enough to reach the finale the boy had intended for himself if nobody had intervened; they would require stitches. Hannibal set his arm down and stood, locking eyes with Will's own lidded ones.

"Suicide is the enemy Will," Hannibal said before leaning down and gathering the boy into his arms.

There was no struggle, as if Will had already accepted his fate, or the blood loss had simply drained the fight from him. The latter being the more likely of the two options. Blood was passed onto Hannibal, rich and metallic in a smell that had his nostrils flaring. He hurried them into his own room and into the en-suite, where a fully stocked medical kit was stored away.

"Will I need you to tell me how old you are and your full name." Hannibal laid the boy down on the floor before rummaging through the vanity cabinets for the large, leather bag.

“I…I’m thirty years…old,” Will mumbled.

Hannibal set the bag beside himself and began rolling up the sleeves of his sleep shirt, the blood from his fingers staining the dark grey material. “Yes very good, and your name?”

Will’s eyes slid shut, his skin seeming to pale by the second. They were running out of time faster than Hannibal would’ve preferred. A consciousness on the verge of death was a version of Will he wished he could’ve toyed with far longer. If the boy would reveal his deepest, darkest desires and secrets, if he harbored any regrets or dreams. Crevices of the boy’s psyche that he would still need to wait to explore, sadly.

Hannibal unzipped the bag, pulling out fresh gauze: bandages, thread, and a needle that came to a slight curve. With thick gauze Hannibal dressed one of the wounds and wrapped it tightly to slow the aggressive bleeding. Will tugged his arm away weakly and Hannibal allowed him, releasing his grip and focusing instead on the unbandaged one.

“Why are you doing this?”

Hannibal looked up but Will’s head was turned away, facing the wall. “Doing what dear boy?” With an alcohol wipe he cleaned the wound, revealing just how deep the cut truly was. Layers of flesh pulled back, splayed open, revealing only a sliver of the inner mechanisms that made up Will.

“This.” Will’s words were clipped, on the verge of tears from the sound of it, and Hannibal decided not to push the boy that was already so close to the edge.

For now.

“Suicide is not an ending I believe suits you.” Hannibal prepped the needle, threading it with the dark black cord. The cuts would scar, there was no avoiding it.

“You don’t know me,” Will whispered.

The thread was pulled taunt and Hannibal pinched the sides of the cut together, disappointed to miss the beautiful display of emotions he knew were playing out on the boy’s face. “You are correct, I do not.”

The needle slid through the raw edges of the boy’s flesh like butter, with only little resistance as the thread followed after. Will was flinching, his chest heaving with either tears or heavy breaths to manage the pain, Hannibal could not tell. He stitched quickly, years of experience on his side that the boy was aware of yet he still decided on such a messy way to end things. As if a part of him was hoping to be saved. A threat to Hannibal that Will was not scared of death, if the need for it ever arose.

“I’ve done this before.”

Hannibal looked up only briefly, the boy’s head still turned away. “I don’t find it shocking that you’ve attempted suicide in the past.”

Will scoffed, the sound closer to a laugh that had Hannibal glancing up once again. “Should I be offended?”

Hannibal smiled. “My goal was not to offend, you are strong Will, and the attempts of your past have only strengthened you.”

“I don’t feel strong,” Will whispered.

“Well you have lost a fair amount of blood,” Hannibal said as he snipped the black thread, a neat row of stitches now lining the boy’s wound.

Another soft laugh left Will’s lips and Hannibal found he could listen to that sound for the rest of his life. Wanted to capture it in a vinyl record to constantly play in the foyer of Will’s wing, echoing off the marble flooring to bounce against the plaster walls.

With a fresh needle and thread Hannibal moved onto the boy’s other arm, cutting away the temporary bandages with the pair of scissors. The bleeding had slowed, clotted in certain areas, and Hannibal wiped it down. The cut wasn’t as deep, shorter than the previous one as well. Hannibal could imagine Will struggling to find symmetry. Could see the way his hand would be coated in blood, drenching the handle of the straight razor so much so that it would’ve slipped from his hand. Poor Will, too weak to even properly take his own life.

“It hurts,” Will whimpered.

Hannibal looked up, surprised to see the boy’s eyes resting upon him. “I can give you something for the pain once I am finished.”

Will blinked before turning away to stare at the inflamed row of fresh stitches. “This is the first time someone has taken care of me afterwards.”

“That also does not shock me,” Hannibal said, eyes never leaving where his hands were working despite how badly he wished to watch the words part from the boy’s lips.

To study the way Will’s eyes dilated with his thoughts, how his lips parted a few seconds before words even escaped them, a telltale sign of how long the boy truly went without speaking. A world without Will’s voice was one Hannibal already knew he had no desire to live in.

“He tried to kill me himself instead,” Will continued, his voice far away, separated from rationality. Fueled by blood loss.

It was an immediate reaction, a flare of jealousy followed by a burn of anger as the image of someone attempting to take Will’s life conjured in Hannibal’s mind. To snuff out what wasn’t theirs to take, what wasn’t theirs to have in the first place. An honor it would be to watch the life drain from such a creature, an even greater one to feast upon him. One such honor not to be bestowed upon some filth that sought Will out for nothing but his body.

“Who is ‘he’ Will?” Hannibal asked, the row of stitches nearly complete.

Will hummed and Hannibal's skin bristled with the feeling of the boy's eyes suddenly upon him. "Who wasn't he?"

Hannibal looked up, the final stitch snipped, and found himself caught in pools of blue. In hazy, stormy seas meant for sinking ships and drowning any sailor that dared to conquer him.

Will's lips twitched before they pulled into what Hannibal could only call a bitter approximation of a smile. A broken mirror desperately trying to reflect.

"He was my devil," he whispered.

Hannibal leaned closer and brushed the sweat matted curls away from the boy's forehead. "I see…and what does that make me Will?"

Will turned away, glazed eyes staring unblinking at the ceiling. "Don't know yet…maybe my god."

Hannibal smiled while his blood warmed, rushing faster in the confines of his veins. It was too early, he had to remind himself that, but the anticipation was building. The game only beginning and Will was already such a beautiful and promising participant.

"I'm going to wash my hands then I will bandage you and give you something for the pain, understand?" Hannibal stood, committing yet again the art that was Will to his mind palace. Spread out to be nailed and hung on his own personal cross, inflamed stitches stained with blood, pale skin speckled with rubies. "Will, answer me."

Far away eyes shifted to him, hazy blue and nearly grey. "Yes…I understand."

Hannibal nodded before moving to the sink to watch as murky red water stained the white porcelain. Depression was setting in and soon he expected Will to go unresponsive, lost in his mind as he once again mourned another failed attempt. Forced to restructure his thinking, to self soothe, except he wasn't alone this time.

The decision to leave the shaving kit was deliberate, bait in the water so to say. An excuse for Hannibal to confiscate a link from the already short chain of Will's autonomy, until the boy wouldn't be able to tell where he ended and Hannibal began.

"It hurts."

Hannibal dried his hands before turning to see Will sitting up, his arms in his lap as he appeared to be studying the stitches.

"I can imagine, would you prefer something to help you sleep as well?" Hannibal asked as he knelt beside the bag to prep the syringe.

Will was silent, unmoving, and Hannibal decided to make the choice for him. He took out a glass bottle, the label reading 'morphine', and plunged the needle into the rubber cap. The clear liquid bubbled as it filled the syringe and Hannibal gave the plunger a quick press to release any air.

“I need you to hold out your arm Will,” Hannibal instructed.

Will kept his eyes forward but he held out his arm, stitches pointed up. “You can do whatever you want with me now.”

“I would never take advantage of you while you were not in the right state of mind.” Hannibal tapped the blueish veins hiding in the crook of Will’s elbow, the lack of body fat leaving them clearly visible.

“Why not?” Will whispered. “Do you like the struggle?”

Hannibal glanced up at the boy before sliding the needle into the boy’s vein. “I have told you already Will, I did not purchase you for sexual reasons.”

With the syringe now empty Hannibal removed the needle, wiping away the small bead of blood with his thumb before bringing it up to his lips. Tasting the dark liquid, savoring the way the metallic tang lingered on his tongue, building recipes to go along with it.

“I don’t believe you,” Will mumbled before laying back, his skull knocking loudly against the tile floor of the bathroom.

Hannibal made quick work of disposing the needle and syringe, before grabbing more gauze and another roll of bandages. “And I do not blame you for your lack of trust.” Hannibal placed gauze along the stitches and started with the dressing. “It is a learned response from years of abuse, I can imagine you have difficulty trusting even yourself at times.”

Will’s eyes had slid shut but Hannibal could see movement beneath the thin skin of his eyelids; he was still listening. With the first arm now bandaged Hannibal moved to the next, allowing himself a few seconds to admire the fresh wound and to imagine how beautifully they’d scar. They would suit Will perfectly.

“Sometimes I…” Will’s words trailed off, his lips parted as he fought with the effects of the morphine.

Hannibal tied off the last of the bandages and placed everything back in the bag, deciding to leave it out in case the boy became violent in the morning. It was a very real possibility, one that he hoped he could bear witness to. To have but a peak into the violence that he knew lived dormant in Will’s mind.

“I don’t even know…who…who I…am sometimes,” Will finally mumbled.

“I can help you find yourself, if you allow me to.” Hannibal knelt as he gathered Will’s limp body into his arms. He walked them into the bedroom and laid Will out on the bed, the boy’s eyes now open with his pupils swallowing the blue of his irises.

“Wha…why…bed?” Will slurred, his hand reaching out to rub at the empty sheets beside him.

Hannibal smiled as he slowly made his way beneath the bedsheets, careful to keep distance between himself and Will. “It would be unsafe to leave you alone Will, which is why I

request you sleep with me tonight."

Will hummed along with a nod. "Okay…doctor."

Hannibal raised a brow at Will's choice of words but the boy's eyes had already fallen shut, weighted down by a drug induced stupor. Hannibal wondered if Will had ever been forced to take drugs or was mediated regularly in any capacity, but that was a question to ask in another time. Instead he found himself laying down to face Will, so he could watch the way his chest rose and fell with every breath, and how his brows and eyelids fluttered. Even in rest his mind was awake and fighting, never allowed a moment of peace; but Hannibal could offer that peace, the boy need only ask.

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The ruffle of bedsheets and the choked off sound of sobs roused Hannibal from his sleep. He rolled over toward the noise, looking through the haze of sleep to find Will's side of the bed empty.

Hannibal sat up, expecting to find Will somewhere in the darkened room. Undoubtedly hunched in on himself, a scared child of a man, horrified with himself now that the fog of drugs had cleared. Hannibal only hoped Will hadn't turned to self harm, he would hate to lose progress by being forced to restrain the boy.

"Will?" Hannibal called out, keeping a calm to his voice he knew the boy would appreciate.

There was no response, which was to be expected from the already selectively mute boy. Hannibal swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood, his bedroom was adequate in size but not vast, there were only so many places for Will to hide. Hannibal glanced at the glowing numbers of the clock on his nightstand, 3:45 am, far too early for either of them to be awake. Will needed his rest, especially for the day Hannibal had planned for him tomorrow.

Quietly Hannibal crept around the bed to find Will where he had expected, nestled in the corner of the room with his bandaged arms still thankfully intact. Hannibal knelt, the boy like a wild animal he didn't wish to startle, only to cage. To collar when the right time presented itself.

"Will, may I ask why you are awake?"

There was no response beside the choppy, rapid breaths leaving Will's lips. The boy teetering on the precipice of a panic attack, clutching to the jagged cliff edge with bloody fingers and broken nails. How commendable of the boy to fight so hard and for so long.

"How nice it would feel to simply let go, swallowed by the gaping maw of your pain?" Hannibal whispered. "To lose yourself in the eroding bluff of your psyche."

The stormy blue of Will's eyes appeared from where he had hidden himself, behind a gloss of tears and strands of hair.

Hannibal smiled, unknowing if the boy could see it in the dark of the room. “Is that what the monsters of your dreams whisper to you Will?”

“Nightmares…not dreams,” Will corrected softly.

“Ah of course, is it safe to assume your nightmares are usually distasteful?” Hannibal questioned further, goading the boy into distracting himself from the edge.

The tension in Will’s muscles lessened. “My thoughts in general are not very tasty.”

Hannibal nodded. “Would you like to share what had you so terrified?”

The tension returned, a snake recoiling. “Therapy doesn’t work on me.”

“Just because I am a psychiatrist does not make this therapy,” Hannibal rationed. “We could simply be having conversations.”

Will’s eyes narrowed, a storm of blue hidden beneath tear wet lashes. “I don’t like to talk.”

Hannibal hummed before creeping closer, close enough that if he wanted he could grab Will if the boy chose to run. Will flinched, rigid body pressed tight to the wall behind him, nowhere to go but through Hannibal.

“We can have conversations when you are ready but please Will come back to bed.”

Contemplation followed sadness as Will’s eyes widened, staring at somewhere yet nowhere at the same time. “I tried to kill myself.”

“That you did.”

Will’s eyes shifted to Hannibal, searching, and he watched as stormy blue melted to broken mirrors. “And you saved me.”

Hannibal nodded. “That I did.”

Will mimicked, his own nod curt, before he stood. It was on shaky legs and he kept himself pressed to the wall, putting as much space between them as possible. Hannibal stood as well, granting Will the semblance of independence by walking to his side of the bed and simply waiting.

Even in the dark of the room Hannibal could see the glare Will shot him as he crawled beneath the sheets. A facial expression that Hannibal found amusing more than anything, no real viciousness behind the storm of his eyes, but he wished to someday behold the true ferocity.

Hannibal slipped into the bed once Will had settled and even with the barren space between them he could feel the boy’s rigidity. He turned onto his side to face Will and if it was possible the boy stiffened more, a spring pulled taunt, tighter and tighter until it was ready to snap and destroy itself in the process.

“Would you like more medication?” Hannibal asked.

Will’s rejection was immediate, a quick shake of his head against the pillow that left his hair somehow even wilder then usual.

Hannibal clicked his tongue, deciding. “Is it the prospect of what could be in your nightmares that has you tense? Or is it sleeping beside me?”

Will’s eyes shot to him only to look away just as quick. Hannibal waited patiently for an answer that never came but somehow that was more telling than if the boy had actually spoken.

The nightmares then.

Hannibal turned away, facing the wall to give Will a semblance of privacy for his thoughts. “Goodnight Will.”

There was a rustle of bedsheets followed by a shivering breath before the bedroom was draped in stifling silence.

“Goodnight.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's a sharp burning that rouses Will from sleep. A pain so intense it had his hands balling into fists and the air leaving his flared nostrils in a hot rush. He has experienced worse, he's sure he has, at least he thought he had. He couldn't quite remember, but that's always how it goes. New pain blotching out the old, like writing on the same ink stained paper over and over again. Until the nib of the pen punches through the paper and the black ink is bleeding onto the pages beneath. Except in Will's case there were no new pages, just a pockmarked desk, being chipped away at by the relentless weight of the owner of said pen.

There's another rush of warm, damp air and Will stiffened as it fanned across his hair. What felt like a hand smoothed across his back, before settling at the nape of his neck where it kneaded at the tender skin.

"Are you awake Will?"

Beneath Will the bed seemed to rumble with the words but as he tried to pull away the hand against his neck tightened. There was a fog swirling in Will's head, with memories of last night trying desperately to push through. Suffocating beneath his mind's pitiful self defense technique of burying, because if he can't remember than obviously it never happened.

"I apologize Will but I do not want you to make any sudden movements." The man's chest continued to vibrate with the words, a disturbingly soothing feeling against Will's pounding skull. "I can explain to you the events of how you ended up here, would you like that? I imagine you are confused."

The effort to speak was too much, his jaw welded shut and the words caught in a sharp lump lodged in his throat. Thankfully the man seemed to understand and his chest expanded with a slow, measured breath.

"I am sure you remember your suicide attempt?"

Will's eyes widened and the sharp burn from earlier managed to grope its way to the forefront of his mind. His eyes moved now, sluggish in the confines of his weighted eyelids, and that's when he saw it. The stark white bandages wrapping the lengths of his forearms, hiding what he knew were long, vicious wounds. The urge to hide his arms beneath the bed sheets was sudden, a cold whip of shame curling around his bare back as it snapped down against his skin. Except Will couldn't move, didn't want to, because if he moved it became real. No longer would he be floating in a sea of fog pretending that the man beneath him hadn't purchased him in a darkened, decrepit theater. If he moved it would be real, he'd be Will again, and he wasn't ready for that.

"Yes you remember," the man continued, as if reading Will's mind. "After I found you I brought you into my bathroom and gave you stitches, the cuts were very deep Will, you had

used a straight razor I failed to secure."

Yes, Will remembered. He could remember how cold the metal of the blade felt as it sliced through the layers of his flesh. Peeling himself open in a blundering attempt to silence the chaos in his mind, to never be seen again as the amalgamation of scars. Only to fail and add to the collection instead. A table of contents to be picked through, a summary on the back of a poorly written book; 'traumatized freak attempts suicide again, when will he ever learn?'

"Afterwards I administered morphine for the pain and brought you into my bed so you could rest, but after only a few hours I awoke to find you in the throes of a panic attack."

The fog thickened and if Will was a different person he would've inquired into the claim of a panic attack. He had no memory of such a thing, in fact he couldn't remember anything past the morphine, which made sense. Mind altering drugs were something he had familiarity with, overdose being a byproduct of such a past. Except he hadn't overdosed, the man had claimed he used to be a surgeon, he wouldn't have allowed that.

"Do you not remember Will? I suppose you might not, I was forced to administer another dose of morphine because shortly after the panic attack you fell into a bout of nightmares."

"Oh." Will hadn't intended to speak but the sound left his lips before he could stop it. It was becoming too real too fast and that small utterance was enough to speed up the descent into painful consciousness at an alarming rate.

"You slept very soundly Will and I tried my best to keep adequate distance between us but you are very persistent in your drug ridden state."

Will's lips parted when instead he found his muscles tensing and coiling, a spring ready to snap, until he pushed away from the man. Throwing himself up into a sitting position fast enough to slosh the fog in his skull and to blur his vision. The man sat up as well, propping himself up against the headboard and regarding Will with a neutral gaze.

"You will make yourself sick if you move too fast Will," the man warned.

The warning was far too late and Will found himself screwing his eyes shut as a wave of nausea crashed over his body. Shifting his insides about like the loose sand of a beach, actually come to think of it…he couldn't remember the last time he had seen the ocean.

"Breathe Will," the man instructed. "I am going to require you to eat soon and then I shall check the stitches and change the dressings."

Will couldn't breathe. How did the man expect him to breathe when he was drowning? Submerged in a roiling sea of pain and turmoil, with the current dragging against him. Pulling him under before letting him back up for a tease of breath that was more salt water than air. It burned, god it burned, yet somehow the water was so cold.

Will struggled. It was always a losing battle that He warned him about yet the lesson never seemed to stick.

Don’t struggle, He would say, if you struggle it’ll only make it worse.

And it always did.

Will would grab at the chipped doorframe with bloody fingertips, his nails worn away to the nub, some even worse than that. He was sure one might even be missing. He was stronger than him, all rippling muscle and an alcoholics rage to fuel them. Will didn’t stand a chance, but if he didn’t struggle than it meant He had won, and Will wasn’t quite ready for that surrender yet.

Once He was done with the game He would shove Will, hard enough to knock the air from his already shriveled lungs and collapse him to the stained tile of the bathroom floor. Those tiles, god forbid anyone took a black light to the things.

Get in the tub, He would say.

And again Will would struggle, until He was physically dragging Will into the chipped basin. Holding his naked body down with hands like sandpaper and a grip like iron.

Don’t even try to climb out, He would say. I’ll hurt you worse if you try.

This time Will would listen because he wasn’t stupid, He was serious and Will wasn’t stupid. Then the water would be cut on, pelting him with frigid shards of ice as He would hold his arms above his head.

Don’t cover yourself, He would say. Cold ain’t it?

Yes, was what Will would scream before the tears followed and his body shivered so intensely he worried it would never stop. While his teeth clattered together hard enough to hurt and his skin throbbed bright pink because it was cold, so cold, god was it cold.

“Will the cold is not real.”

Will shook his head, how could he say that, he was right beside him after-all. Forcing his arms above his head, wasn’t he?

“Will you are stuck in the past, it may seem real but it is not.”

“What?” Will gasped, curious as to why there was no water clinging to his frigid lips.

Warmth caressed Will’s face, shielding him from the unforgiving pelting of icy shards. “Focus on me Will, come back to me.”

Will looked towards Him but He was nowhere to be found. In fact there was no dingy bathroom with the chipped doorframe and blood stained paint, and he wasn’t naked in a grimy bathtub. The dark blue paint of a bedroom greeted him instead and as he focused harder it was a bed holding his weight, with the man sat across from him.

The man’s hand was cupping Will’s jaw but there was no anger in the way his fingers molded to his bones. It was delicate in a possessive way, as if Will were some fine china, a teacup

that could easily break. As if sensing or seeing the change in Will the man smiled, his thumb smoothing what must've been tears away from his cheeks.

"Hello Will," the man greeted softly.

Will's breath stuttered. "Hi."

The man continued to smile as he dropped his hand and despite how badly Will wanted to hate the contact he found himself disappointed. The touch was grounding, holding him to the present, pulling back against the demons from his past.

"You had another brief episode, do you know what triggered it?"

Will shrugged, it was as honest as he could be. It was hard enough for him to identify triggers himself, having to explain them out loud to a third party would be damn near impossible. Except it seemed like the man found his answer unacceptable and he leaned closer, head tilted ever so slightly in thought.

"Was it something I had said? If so I would greatly appreciate if you could tell me what it was so I may avoid triggering you again."

"I…I don't know," Will mumbled. "I'm sorry…I don't know."

"Why are you apologizing Will?" The man questioned.

Will flinched and he focused on where his bandaged arms were resting in his lap. "You want me to do something and I am unable to."

The man hummed. "Do you have fears of failure Will?"

The question was nearly enough to make Will laugh and the urge to reply sarcastically surprised him. The answer was such an obvious one that the man surely knew yet he asked anyway, clearly to goad Will into speaking. To divulge the inner workings of his psyche, well…it wouldn't be that easy.

"Do you?" Will countered and shockingly the man laughed. It was a deep, brief sound that had Will's heart jumping against his bruised ribs.

"Not particularly no, not in the way most people would experience I presume."

Will hadn't expected a response, nevertheless a genuine one and it left him feeling numb. Hollowed out by his inability to converse, something that the man didn't seem to mind.

"Hard to fail when you never try," Will whispered.

"Were you punished for your failures? Held up to standards you could never humanly meet with the illusion you could? Just for the monsters of your past to have an excuse to punish you?"

This time Will couldn't stop the bitter laugh from leaving his trembling lips. He was too tired and stretched far too thin for having such accusations thrown at him. No matter how badly the words rang true. So he shrugged, the best answer he could muster without breaking down in a mess of panic and tears.

To his relief the man appeared to have lost interest and began climbing out of the bed. He stood and from Will's peripherals he could see the man stretch, all thick muscles and power hidden beneath soft clothes.

"Please follow me Will, I shall fix you breakfast."

*

The plate of buttered toast and fancily prepared eggs stared at Will ominously. It was a beautiful plate of food, more than he ever deserved, yet the mere idea of stomaching any of it made him want to vomit.

"It won't bite Will, I assure you that," the man said suddenly from across the counter.

Will looked up and nodded. "I'm aware of that."

The man smiled, no doubt amused with himself. "You must eat Will, I cannot give you any painkillers until you eat."

At the mention of painkillers it was as if Will's body was reminded of the sharp burn plucking at his stitches like guitar strings. He flexed his hands before balling them into fists, digging his blunt nails into the flesh of his palms.

"I imagine you are in pain," the man observed. "If you'd like I could feed you?"

Will's eyes widened while the man's smile deepened, amused to no end, clearly. "I can move just fine, thank you."

The man bowed his head in what Will wished was agreement but knew realistically was a ceasefire for the time being.

"As long as you eat Will."

Will nodded, he knew that, of course he knew he had to eat. It was overcoming the fear of becoming sick and wasting such meticulously prepared food that he had an issue with. The stabbing, emptiness of starvation was such a familiar pain that he found himself longing for it like an old friend. While on the other hand the swelling, bloated feeling of a full stomach was something he found nearly unbearable.

"We may try a liquid diet, if that would be easier for you?" The man suddenly suggested.

Curls obscured his view as Will looked up to meet the man's gaze from over the lip of his coffee cup. The man had his brows raised, silently expecting an answer.

“Yeah…that…that could work.” Will nodded along with his own words as if that would help convince himself that he wasn’t upset, that he wasn’t disappointed. That he hadn’t failed again for the second time in the span of less than 24 hours.

Silently the man gathered the now cold plate of food before walking it to the waste bin and scraping the contents into it. And with each thud of wasted food Will’s muscles tensed with tremors and memories, vivid recollections of what it meant to be ungrateful.

Of how He would make Will eat the scraps from the floor like a dog. Hands and knees He would say as He tossed the morsels from his plate that were deemed unworthy, but not for Will. And Will would eat them, because he would be so hungry the thought of tearing a chunk from the fat of His cheek had crossed his mind as he knelt on that disgusting floor.

“I will prepare a type of protein shake for you then I would like for you to shower before I change your bandages, are you able to do that for me Will?”

Will jerked as his mind finally returned to his body, to the pain that was all encompassing him like a soaked blanket. He looked to the man to see that he was watching him expectantly from across the granite island, paused in whatever task he had been performing. Brows raised and no doubt awaiting a response to a question Will had been too far into the past to hear.

“You left again Will.” The man resumed his chore of pulling out a blender from some tucked away hiding spot and setting it on the counter, putting his back to Will. “Your dissociation appears worse than I thought.”

Dissociation, Will remembered learning about that in high school and how much it greatly resonated with him at the time. Finally, he remembered thinking, a label for the freak. Only for him to forget about it years later, up until now of course, except now it was different. These episodes of dissociation were nothing like the ones in high school where time seemed to slow and suddenly third period was over and he was shuffling his way to the next class. No. These were violent, dragging him kicking and screaming into the past where time sped up and his eyes were held open by metal hooks. Forcing him to watch from the confines of his own body all the horrific things that had happened to him, all while the people of the present shook their heads and clicked their teeth.

Poor kid they would think, he was never the same.

“It…it’s like I go somewhere else,” Will found himself mumbling. “Like my mind leaves my body and…and enters a different version of myself.”

The man hummed but gave no sign of turning around, instead busying himself with what looked like chopping up fresh fruit. “That is common with sufferers of ptsd, you have been through quite a lot Will.”

It never failed to shock Will at having his own suffering so unabashedly said aloud. That the man had no desire to pretend Will was anything but what he was, broken.

“I lose time…even before I was taken I used to lose time,” Will admitted.

“Dissociation can be present in anyone at times, it is not always a symptom of ptsd.”

Will dropped his gaze to his arms, where the stitches had begun another round of throbbing beneath the bandages. “Is there any way to stop it?”

Finally the man turned, revealing a glass containing what looked like a pale yellow smoothie of sorts with a metal straw nestled inside. Will blinked, he hadn’t even heard the blender turn on, and took it graciously.

“Thank you,” he whispered before taking a slow sip. It tasted of banana and some other fruit he couldn’t quite place, along with a slight grainy texture that he assumed was the protein powder. It was one of the most delicious things he had ever tasted.

“You are very welcome Will, drink it slowly, but to answer your previous question no. There is no concrete way of stopping dissociation all together but there are ways of preventing an episode or lessening the severity of one.”

Will’s mouth was full but he raised his brows in curiosity, no doubt losing them in his mess of curls. At this the man smiled and Will found himself looking away focusing instead on the way the smoothie sunk with each sip and not on the slight burn consuming his cheeks.

“Grounding exercises are one example, a technique I could help you with if I notice you are becoming absent,” the man explained. “You can also perform them yourself by saying out loud what your name is, where you are, and what time it is.”

Will nodded, trying and probably failing to hide the grimace on his face as his stomach began to swell with the drink. Leaving him uncomfortably bloated that bordered on the edge of downright painful, except it was nothing like the bubbling nausea of ingesting solid foods. So he would manage, he had to.

The man leaned against the counter behind him before folding his arms across his chest. A lazy, relaxed posture that had Will slightly taken aback. The man looked so comfortable, not just because of his loose sleepwear, but in his skin. It was a feeling Will had given up chasing long ago, and now he was sure he’d never find comfort again.

“You are thinking so hard I can practically hear it.”

Will met the man’s eyes only briefly, long enough to catch the glimmer of what might’ve been amusement. “Sorry.”

“Unnecessary apologizing is something however that we can permanently fix.”

Another ‘sorry’ sat on Will’s tongue before he caught himself and instead stole a glance at the man, who had the faintest trace of a smile spread across his face.

“You can try…I’ve been told I can be stubborn.” It was meant to be a dry attempt at humor yet the memories associated with the word left Will tense.

Stubborn. Will always thought it was a funny way to describe someone resisting abuse. He could remember the handlers referring to him as such when he would struggle. How they

would shake their heads, crossed their arms, exchanged glances with one another in a silent ‘get a load of this kid? One of them stubborn ones’.

Just gotta hit ‘em harder, one of them would say.

And Will would shake his head, blood dripping from his mouth that he hoped was from a split lip and not something worse.

Then the other would join as if it was some hobby to pass the time. And they’d both start hitting Will, until he was sure the blood from his mouth was from something worse and that he’d drown in it and….

“Will.”

There was movement, sudden and in the corner of Will’s eye that had him jumping. Except the stool he was sat on was far too small and the movement was far too fast and suddenly he was flat on his back. The fall wasn’t far but the floor was hard and the air was knocked from his lungs, while a dark haze covered his vision.

Through the haze Will saw the man, moving faster than he’s seen, and lifting his head to place something softer than hardwood floor beneath him.

“I apologize Will, I did not mean to startle you so severely,” the man said. “You hit your head, did you lose consciousness?”

Will blinked, the haze clearing enough for him to make out the shapes and plains of the man’s face. “I…no?”

The man tilted his head, wisps of his hair framing his face as they fell forward. “No? You do not sound so sure Will.”

“I…I didn’t,” Will reassured.

“Okay but I would appreciate it if you could humor me and follow the tip of my finger.” The man held up his pointer finger and Will fought the urge to sigh as he obeyed possibly the one request he couldn’t fail.

Will knew that it was to check for a concussion but if anything he was more embarrassed than injured, lost again in the past and his own mind enough to be startled by mere walking. Seemingly satisfied the man gave a brief nod before leaning away slightly, allowing Will to realize that the soft thing he was lying on was actually the man’s hand cupping his skull.

“I see no signs of a concussion but if a headache develops throughout the day then I will require you to tell me,” the man instructed with all the seriousness of a doctor examining their patient in a clinic.

“Okay,” Will croaked despite knowing that his agreement was nothing but a lie. He couldn’t possibly burden the man with something as trivial as a headache when he had more important things to worry about, such as….

“I thought…I remember you saying you worked today?”

The man’s lips twitched in what could’ve been the whisper of a smile. “Excellent memory Will, yes I must be at my office in an hour or so.”

‘Leaving you alone’ went unspoken and for some horribly pathetic reason Will found the idea daunting. Nobody, not even himself could predict what kind of hellscapes his mind would create just to test him with. And without the man there to be his paddle when the waves of the past consumed him, well, he didn’t know how he was meant to remain afloat.

“You will also be accompanying me.”

Will blinked, surely he had misheard. “What?”

With the hand cradling his skull the man urged Will to sit up. “I will be taking you to work with me, since in my professional opinion I do not believe you are stable enough to be left alone.”

The words registered slowly, as if the man had poured warm viscera over him and it was creeping its way down his body. Covering every inch of skin until he was saturated in it, choking on it, inhaling it with every breath until he was left gasping. He looked down at his shaking hands but there was no thick sludge coating them like he expected. No blood sticking his fingers together as he spread them, no flesh buried beneath the beds of his nails, but that didn’t mean others would be blind to it.

Will was dirty and everyone would see that, there was no hiding it.

“Will you are breathing very hard, has what I said upset you?”

Will looked to the man, eyes the color of oxidized blood. “They’ll know.”

The man’s brows furrowed. “If you are referring to my patients discovering our arrangement then I can assure you they will not.”

“How?”

The man suddenly stood and Will watched, eyes following the movements until a hand was extended before him. He took it and allowed himself to be lifted to his feet. The smoothie seemed to slosh in his stomach, irritating the sensitive lining of the shrunken organ.

“I will not allow you to come into contact with anyone, if that is what you desire?” The man said, a finality to his tone that meant he was serious.

But was that what Will desired? What he honestly desired was to be dead but the good doctor had put a stop to that almost immediately, as if the man had known he would try. As if he knew Will could never ignore the temptation, as if he knew he’d find the straight razor among the nearly empty cabinets…tucked away neatly in its case.

Will’s brows furrowed and he pulled his hand from the man’s gentle hold. “Y-you knew I’d try to kill myself…didn’t you?”

The man's own hand fell to his side and he shifted, taking in a deep breath that had Will tensing in time with the swelling of his lungs.

"I had considered it a possibility yes."

Will's lips parted in a silent 'oh' as somehow the admission did very little to bother him. At least the man was being honest, or, offering a semblance of honesty to placate him for the time being. It was more than most people had ever done for him and that was saying…not much.

"Does this upset you?" The man asked.

"I…I don't know," Will admitted. Technically the man did nothing wrong, unless he desired to look at the situation from a different angle. Where he could say he had attempted suicide by coercion, maybe even proxy, but even to himself he knew that reasoning was bullshit.

The man had simply left the straight razor in the bathroom, curious as to what would become of its fate.

"If you are well enough I would appreciate you shower so I may change your dressings before we leave," the man said.

Will nodded and wordlessly turned to start up the stairs, ignoring the dark eyes of the man that he knew were upon him. The bedroom he had been granted was oddly cold from being empty and he found himself hesitating at the berth of the doorway, would the evidence from his attempt remain? The thought of seeing blood, even his own, caused the contents of his already weakened stomach to roil. The man would've never gotten a chance to clean the tub if he had been tending to him for the entire night. Unless somehow in his morphine riddled state the man had been able to slip away but that was unlikely.

The floor seemed to soften beneath his feet as he stepped through the threshold of the doorway. No longer was it hardwood beneath his soles but the viscera that had coated him so thoroughly. It seeped between his toes, cold where it clung to his skin, determined to hold him in place. Unmoving, a body left to rot and decay, captured in time.

Frozen.

Frozen was what Will was as he stood at the entrance of the en-suite, staring at the mess he had left behind. The blood had oxidized. What was once a shiny, ruby red against the porcelain was now the color of rust. The straight razor sat in a dried puddle of its own, the blade dirtied, no longer pristine and never would be again. The metal forever holding Will's failure in the microscopic notches of its sharpened edge.

"Will?"

There was no reason to turn yet Will flinched as the vibrations of the man's voice settled over him. The sound wasn't close and once again Will found himself thankful for the underserved respect the man had for his person.

“You may shower in my room, if you are unsettled by the sight.”

It would’ve been easy to say yes, to walk away from the consequences and take the out the man was offering. To come back later and see the blood gone, the razor tucked away in a new hiding place, as if it never happened. The only evidence being the throbbing stitches running the length of Will’s own wrists and the memories trapped in his skull. Yet even those were subject to his outside influences.

“No.” Will shook his head. “I’m fine.”

“Very well.”

The were no telltale sounds of footsteps receding, the man could be silent as the dead if wanted, a trait common in the predators Will was familiar with.

Will stepped into the bathroom and allowed the door to shut behind him. The vanity mirror hung ominously before him yet he kept his eyes down, there was no reason to look, he wouldn’t recognize the person anyway. He stripped his clothes on autopilot, watching rather than participating as he stepped into the glass encased shower. The water that pelted him was cold and his breath caught in his throat at the memories that came with it.

It would heat up soon he had to remind himself, it wouldn’t be cold forever. But as steam began to fill the stall and the glass fogged with the heat Will realized he had never been colder.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading, sorry it took me so long to update, I have been doing not so well lol but if anyone is also reading Devil in Wolf's Clothing I will hopefully be updating that one soon too.

comments are very much appreciated!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sorry guys this chapter is kinda a shitty filler :(((

Gentle.

Gentle was how Will would describe the man's hands as they handled him. Undressing and redressing his wounds with such caution that if he closed his eyes it could've easily been mistaken for care. So he kept his eyes open, unblinking and unfocused as he watched the man work.

"You will be masquerading as a student observing me for one of your courses."

The man's voice pulled Will from his reverie. "What?"

The faintest trace of a smile grazed the man's lips and his eyes flickered up from where they had been focused. "Since you will be accompanying me to my practice you will require an alias."

Will nodded.

"Yours will be of a university student, observing me for clinic hours."

University…Will remembered a time when he thought about going to college. When he was concerned about scholarships and grants and how on earth would a poor boy from Louisiana afford such a thing. All those problems that had once felt like the heaviest stones atop his shoulders were now nothing; what he wouldn't give to be a broke college student.

"Don't…don't I look a little too old for that?" Will questioned.

"You are only thirty Will and you actually look quite young for your age," the man reassured as he finished wrapping the last of the bandages.

Will stared at the pristine white that now encased his forearms, the dressings almost too perfect to be upon him. "And what about these?"

The man stood from where he had knelt before Will to tower over him. "You will be wearing long sleeves."

Will remained on the bed as the man disappeared into the vast closet, slumped with his hair clinging to his neck in damp ringlets. The smoothie had settled more easily into his stomach than he had expected, compared to solid foods that would sit like a rock. It would be harder

to gain weight on a liquid diet, to finally appear ‘normal’ for his age and height, but the search for normalcy was something he had long since abandoned.

The man returned holding folded fabric that was a deep blue. He held it up, the material unfolding to reveal another sweater. It didn’t look as soft as the maroon one and suddenly Will found himself concerned about its whereabouts.

“This should fit you quite well,” the man said.

Will took the offering and pulled the sweater over his body, careful to not catch the sleeves on the bandages. As promised the sleeves were long enough to hide what damage had been done, coming to a stop around his mid palm. He curled his fingers around the material, comforted to know that there was one secret he had control over, for now.

“The color brings out your eyes Will,” the man commented.

Will’s gaze flickered up to the man, was he expecting a response? From beneath his curls he could see an obscured view of the man’s own eyes. They were an odd color, like whiskey in a glass being held up to the light. A mosaic of colors that seemed to shift along with the man’s emotions, or whatever he was projecting for the world to see.

“Eyes are distracting,” Will whispered as he kept his gaze hidden behind the curtain of his overgrown curls.

The man smiled. “I suspect you are not fond of eye contact?”

Will wanted to recoil from the conversation. The damaged neurons in his brain firing off that he was stepping out of line, that he was in danger, a punishment was eminent.

“I see too much,” he ended up saying.

“I imagine what you see touches every part of your psyche,” the man observed. “Leaving no room for yourself surrounded by the mirrors in your skull.”

Will grimaced and dropped his head, fingers curled tight in the sleeves of the sweater. “You don’t know me.”

“You are correct Will, I do not.” The man moved away, stepping once again into the walk-in closet.

The air was no longer stifling, allowing Will to take in a much needed trembling breath. The effect the man had on him was an unwelcome one, unfamiliar territory that left him struggling for balance, for an upper-hand. Nothing the man did was like anything Will had seen from previous buyers and it was…unsettling. Leaving him to wonder if he would’ve preferred the usual violence, the comfort of the predictability. The ease in which he could’ve manipulated a person of habit.

The man emerged from the closet in clothes similar to the night Will was purchased. A three piece suit, except this one was grey with red plaid, clearly tailored as it formed to the man’s

body impeccably. The man looked powerful, confident, just as intimidating as he had been that fateful night.

“Are you ready Will?” The man asked as he adjusted the cuffs of his jacket.

A sudden numbness overtook Will as his extremities began to shake and tingle. Despite being forced into it the man’s home was now his bubble, his safe haven, and that was about to be uprooted. The rug pulled out from under him so to say, and he was anything but prepared.

The man suddenly crouched before him and Will flinched at the closeness. “You will do magnificently Will.”

Will’s eyes widened at the words and no matter how strongly he willed the feeling to dissipate tears began to bead on his lashes. Praise was a foreign concept.

“What is it that you fear?” The man asked, the timber of his voice dangerously smooth.

Teeth sunk into his bottom lip as Will continued to tremble. The man had no right to dip into his mind, to sample his thoughts as if they were laid out on a silver platter. His mind was the only thing left of him, his beliefs and ideas and emotions, and if the man was allowed access to that it would be….tainted.

“You may reside in the private exit used for my patients,” the man conceded. “I will not allow them to use it and you will be undisturbed the entire day.”

“Is…is that okay?” Will mumbled.

The man sniffed, a sound Will was coming to realize was the equivalent to a laugh. “Of course Will, I would not suggest it otherwise.”

Will nodded, he could handle a private room, an extension of the haven. A place they wouldn’t be able to see how dirty he truly was, to see the filth that coated his skin like soot.

The man stood and Will followed, a modicum of space between them. “Excellent, it is only a short drive to my office.”

They left the house in silence and Will kept his eyes downcast while he waited patiently by the man’s side as the front door was locked. The position reminded Will of a man and his pet, and the phantom weight of a collar suddenly settled snugly around his neck. His eyes followed the invisible length of the leash down to where it would’ve been clutched in the fist of the man but instead he found it bolted to a dirtied floor.

Will’s eyes shot up to see himself faced with four eggshell colored walls of damaged drywall. Blood streaked the paint and chips were taken out of the flooring, with bits of human nail still stuck in the grain.

A chill covered Will’s suddenly bare skin, the luxurious clothes he had previously been dressed in somehow torn from his body. His chest began to heave while the familiar sound of sloppy, unmeasured footsteps approached the door he had failed to notice.

“Will?”

The walls dissolved, the clothes returned, and Will found himself being held upright by a bruising grip around his bicep. His legs had given out beneath him and if it wasn’t for the man he would’ve awoken to the unforgiving embrace of concrete.

“Where are you right now Will?” The man asked.

Will took in his surroundings. He was outside, on the stoop of a house…the man’s house…in a neighborhood he didn’t recognize but looked affluent. The room wasn’t real, the collar wasn’t real, the footsteps weren’t real. But was anything real? What could he trust if his mind was his own unreliable narrator?

“Will?” The man was speaking to him, expecting an answer to a question he couldn’t remember.

Tears brimmed in Will’s eyes, a weakness he had hoped was beaten out of him yet remained. He wasn’t scared, had no right to be scared, he deserved whatever punishment the man chose for him. The grip on his bicep began to loosen and Will scrambled to find his balance.

“Can you stand?” The man asked.

It was such a simple question yet Will couldn’t speak, his throat closed up by the onslaught of emotions threatening to spill over. He wanted to tell the man to hurt him, to throw him to the ground and stomp his skull into the concrete until he was unrecognizable. Until the brain matter that so thoroughly tortured him was leaking into the storm drain. It would be easier to cope with, his demise, than whatever game the man had destined him to lose.

Suddenly the man’s grip was shifting and Will was being lifted from the ground, held in strong arms as if he were a damsel in distress. In a way he supposed he was, damaged people like him did tend to attract…saviors. He was carried back into the house but instead of climbing the stairs the man walked them into a part of the house he had never explored. Tears slid down the slopes of Will’s cheeks, new locations were never good. You never survived the new location, wasn’t that what all criminologists said?

The man placed Will in a leather chair before brushing the still damp curls away from his forehead. Will braced for the hand to clutch into a fist, gathering his curls to use as leverage. It was a miracle he had any hair left from how often that had been done to him. Except the touch remained soft and instead the man was stepping away.

“I need to make some calls, do not leave this chair.”

Will nodded, he could do that. That was easy. An order he could follow.

The man smiled and left, walking into the hallway and out of sight. Will pressed himself into the chair until every surface of his back was touching the plush leather. He gripped at the armrests, digging his nails into the seams. They were about to leave, they were supposed to leave. The man still had to work, Will was keeping him from his job. A punishment was what he deserved and if the man was unwilling to deliver one then he would do it himself. Even if

the small, nearly beaten to death rational part of his brain argued that he had done nothing wrong.

Had he?

The suicide attempt was the reason the man did not trust to leave him alone.

Anxiety was the reason the man was allowing him to use the patient exit.

A dissociation episode was the reason they were not currently in the car.

Will dug his nails further into the seams, clawing at them until he was sure either his nails or the thread would snap. Yet it was the men that fateful night in Louisiana that were the reason for it all. Tears continued to cut paths down his cheeks but he could not pin point their origin, he thought he was long past pitying himself.

The man returned, striding into the room with an air of calm surrounding his person that forced the opposite affect on Will. The man removed his suit jacket and draped it over the back of the matching arm chair. Will braced himself, every muscle tensing as the tears dried on his lashes, he wouldn't cry…not during a punishment. The whiskey colored eyes of the man met Will's stare and he smiled before placing himself in the armchair.

"My apologies Will, I had to cancel my appointments for the day."

Will blinked, the entire day cleared…just for him.

"It has come to my attention that you are not ready to leave the house, would you agree?" The man continued to ask.

So many questions that Will didn't know how to answer. It reminded him of his time in school, which was mostly a blur yet the testing anxiety still remained a familiar sensation. The embarrassment of being behind everyone else, of being the new kid with no one to turn to.

"You may answer truthfully Will, there is no wrong choice."

Will swallowed, nails digging ditches into the leather as he nodded.

The man tilted his head. "Is that a yes to my initial question?"

Again Will nodded.

"Do you know why you have suddenly fallen nonverbal?" The man questioned. "You were making great progress with your speech."

Will opened his mouth only to close it seconds later. He was still incredibly tense, adrenaline replacing the blood in his veins as he waited for the inevitable. The man's eyes raked over his body, lingering where his nails were digging out the seams of the chair.

"You may relax Will, I do not wish to harm you."

No.

No.

No no no.

“W-why?”

The man’s eyes widened slightly, a hint of surprise. “Why do I not wish to harm you?”

“Just…just hurt me,” Will whispered. “Get it over with.”

The expression on the man’s face was neutral, revealing nothing as he stood from the chair. The man stalked towards him and Will held his gaze, trembling where he sat. He had asked for it, practically begged, yet he couldn’t stop himself from flinching as the man grabbed at the collar of his sweater. He was jerked forward, away from the back of the chair and held hovering above the leather. Relying on the strength of the man to either throw him from the chair or to drop him as if nothing had happened.

The man hummed as his eyes roamed Will’s face. “Violence is what you understand.”

Will swallowed, the collar of the sweater cutting into the scarred flesh of his neck. “Yes…but so do you.”

A grin spread across the man’s face before he was lowering Will back into the chair. No. No. No. Will pushed himself from the chair and onto the floor, the nobs of his bony knees cracking loudly on the hardwood. With his head lowered all Will could see were the creases of the man’s brown dress shoes as he took measured steps back. Allowing enough berth between them for Will to kneel, arms crossed behind his back and knees spread.

“May I ask what you are doing Will?”

Will was shaking, his breaths leaving him in loud, quivering exhales. “I deserve a punishment…sir.”

“And why is that?”

“I’ve…I’ve been bad.” Articulation was not one of his strong suits and for once Will was unsure of what he wanted to be punished for.

It had always been so clear with Will’s previous buyers. They would set impossible rules for him to follow only to fail and be punished for it. Then the cycle would repeat and he would suffer but he would never be confused, never lost. Never thrown out into the sea and expected to either sink or swim. He always knew, could always see through his buyers as if they were transparent, but not this man. This man was a fort that Will was left naked and stranded inside of.

“How have you been bad Will? I need you to be specific.”

“I tried…tried to kill myself…and I was supposed to join you to work.” Will was answering before he could think, before he could carefully pick and choose his words.

The man hummed. “What do you think your punishment should be Will?”

Will wanted to look up, to meet the man’s eyes and desperately attempt to read him. To gauge his emotions and predict his reactions, but then the man would see him as well and that couldn’t happen. He wouldn’t let it, not anymore.

“I…I don’t—” Will allowed his eyes to wander, to trail up the long tree like legs of the man to where his belt sat, snugly fastened and glinting—“whip me sir.”

Will’s words hung in the air like condensation from a too hot shower, filling the room until it suffocated anyone stupid enough to linger. He was shaking where he knelt and the bones of his knees were screaming yet he couldn’t move, the man had not told him to do so. He wanted to look up, god he had to look up, how was he meant to survive if he couldn’t see?

How was he meant to survive if he himself could be seen too?

“Will I want you to stand up.”

Will’s legs trembled as he stood and the room spun with the sudden movement. From the new height Will could see the man’s chest and the beginnings of his neck, where the crisply pressed lines of his shirt collar sat. How easy it could’ve been to slit that supple flesh instead of his own wrists.

“I want to help you,” the man said.

It horrified Will but he laughed. It was short and clipped and more of a quick exhale of air but a laugh nonetheless. “You didn’t consider helping me before you bought me…just like… like…everyone else?” His fists clenched at his sides and he looked up, meeting the burning gaze of the man. “What makes you think I even want your help?”

The corners of the man’s lips twitched with what Will now recognized as amusement. “By purchasing you I removed you from the hands of an organization that was planning to slaughter you that night if you failed to sell.”

“You think I wasn’t aware of that?” Will sneered. “You could of called the cops, taken me to the police station.”

“And how would I explain my finding you?”

Will continued to tremble but now it was hot, blood boiling with anger he hadn’t felt in years. “You could have lied, said you found me on the side of the road or in…in some alley.”

The man was smiling fully now and Will wondered if his nails were sharp enough to pierce the flesh of his own palms.

“I’m expected to trust you in this fantasy? Believe that you wouldn’t seek revenge by placing me behind bars simply for associating with a crowd you hold great disdain for?”

“Not disdain.” Will shook his head before stepping closer, toe to toe with the man. “Hate, I hate people like you.”

Again the air was stifling with Will’s words and again he was begging for the man to hurt him. If only to allow him to fight back, a chance to unleash the anger he had been bottling up for years, to entertain the dark thoughts that plagued him when he sleeps. God did he want it, he wanted it so badly his blood sang with the desire.

But then the man was moving quicker than Will had expected and suddenly his back was pressed to a muscled chest. With one of the mans arms wrapped firmly around his throat, tight enough to squeeze the air from him in desperate gasps.

“My dear Will, you are showing much more promise than I had expected.” The man’s mouth was so close, Will could feel the words spoken against his cheek.

Will clawed at the man’s arm, grabbing at the expensive material of the dress shirt while his legs kicked out beneath him uselessly. This was not what he had imagined, this was not how he wanted to go.

The man shifted behind Will and the arm around his throat loosened, only for a large hand to grab at his jaw instead. Forcing his head back so it rested against the man’s shoulder and exposed the delicate skin of his neck. The tendons beneath his flesh screamed at the stretch and Will whimpered as he blindly reached behind himself, hoping he’d at least leave some defensive wounds.

“Shh shh shh, relax,” the man whispered and the husky tone of his words was followed by the pinch of what Will knew to be a needle in his skin.

“N-no,” Will begged but it was in vain. Whatever he had been injected with was already taking its toll as the edges of his vision began to darken.

“This is for your own good Will, I promise, I only want what’s best for you.”

Will’s mouth fell open as words formed in his throat that he wished to scream, except they fell flat in a pathetic groan. The muscles in his limbs weakened, while his eyelids grew impossibly heavy and the chair sitting before him turned to two.

“Shh, sleep now Will,” the man whispered yet he sounded so far, a disembodied voice speaking to him from somewhere in the fort. “You will become beautifully.”

***

Will’s body was like deadweight in Hannibal’s arms yet the boy continued to struggle. Slurring his words and flailing about like a fish with a hook pierced through the flesh of its cheek, it was a very commendable effort. Will was stronger than Hannibal had expected and that left him pleasantly surprised, he was worried the boy’s fire had been snuffed out permanently.

With great care Hannibal carried Will back to the room that had been dedicated as his and placed him on the bed. Will's eyes were open but lidded, clouded with the drug that wouldn't render him unconscious but in a limbo of blissful inebriation.

"The justice system could not help you as I can," Hannibal began as he maneuvered the decorative lounge chair from the corner of the room. "They would paint you as a victim, as weak and broken, something you are not."

Will was watching yet Hannibal was unsure if the boy would remember anything being said, the dose was difficult to calculate for a man of his age and severity of malnourishment. It would need to be tweaked.

With the chair now positioned by the bed Hannibal entered the adjoining walk-in closet. There he opened a drawer to pull out flannel lounge pants that would ultimately fit too big on the boy, he would purchase a proper wardrobe soon.

Hannibal exited the closet to be met with the sight of Will writhing, trying desperately to flip onto his stomach and drag himself from the bed. Hannibal smiled and eased the boy back into place with a hand on his shaking chest.

"You are very resilient Will." He placed the pants on the chair. "I'm going to remove your pants now."

Will blinked sluggishly, struggling to keep his eyes open, to be vigilant. Hannibal unbuttoned the boy's slacks with clinical detachment and slid them from his legs. There were the beginnings of bruises blooming on the caps of the boy's knees and Hannibal smoothed his thumb over the protruding bone.

"Bruises suit you well," he whispered.

Will's eyes had fallen shut but there was movement beneath the thin skin of his eyelids, he was still conscious. Hannibal pulled the flannel pants over the boy's legs and cinched the drawstrings as tight as possible, tying them in a neat bow. He folded the slacks and left them at the foot of the bed before sitting in the chair he had moved.

"Will? Can you hear me?" Hannibal waited but ultimately there was no response, a lower dose would be needed in the future.

He relaxed back into the chair, crossing his legs and seizing the opportunity to admire Will openly. They had taken many steps back, with nearly no progress towards the boy's becoming, but Hannibal was a patient man and Will was proving to be well worth the wait.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The graphite tip of the pencil carved smoothly into the paper. Depositing various shades of grays in its wake, with some bordering on nearly black where shadowing was required. A destruction of one material resulting in the creation of another, friction and minerals coming together to form art. A common theme Hannibal often found repeating in his life. However he was not complaining, especially not as he was committing Will's likeness to paper. Will Graham, another phoenix born from the ashes of destruction. Where most would see damaged goods Hannibal beheld art, living and breathing and glorious in its potential.

Already has Will proven himself worthy in so many ways he could never comprehend. A capacity for violence Hannibal had seen brimming in the blues of the boy's eyes the moment he had been forced onto stage. Where most would have mistaken the emotions for terror, a victim scared of its fate, Hannibal saw the truth. The palpable anger, the perfect show of fear when really Will was anything but that.

Hannibal ached to know how Will had been deemed unsellable. How he had been bought so hurriedly and coveted only to be returned years later. What horrors had the boy revealed that even the lowest dregs of society could not stomach? Hannibal could imagine the scenarios for hours, crafting them scene for scene as if Will was his ready actor. But soon enough, he would behold the real thing and the flickering movies of violence in his mind would be unneeded.

Will stirred and Hannibal paused his illustration, resting the nib of the pencil where he had just begun the details of curls. The boy had sprawled out throughout the past couple hours, limbs spread in various positions that left him looking surprisingly comfortable. Something Hannibal had yet to see from the boy since bringing him home. Perhaps, daily dosing would be beneficial to Will's mental health. If only to lessen his stress and allow more room for deeper cognitive thinking.

Again Will stirred and a string of incoherent words left his parted lips. Hannibal placed the sketchpad down on the nightstand before leaning closer and combing his fingers through the boy's unruly curls. He would need to cut them soon.

"Will?"

The boy groaned and Hannibal took note of the light sheen of sweat coating his skin, a change of his bandages would be required as well as a bath.

"Will are you awake?"

"Ngh…nu…no," Will murmured. "Vin…ent."

Hannibal stilled his hand and listened. A name what he swore he heard leave Will's mouth.

“Stuh…V-Vincent.” Will twitched, his face contorting into a look of pain. “Sta…stop.”

Vincent. Hannibal had not met anyone at the auction with that name or alias, so it was safe to assume that the man plaguing Will’s dreams was a previous buyer.

“Vincent is not here Will,” Hannibal reassured yet it was unlikely the boy was coherent.

Will flinched, pink lips parted as he began to pant. An urge overcame Hannibal then to run his thumb over the supple flesh, so he did. The boy’s bottom lip was soft, slightly wet from where his tongue had darted out to moisten it. Hannibal imagined the majority of Will’s skin was soft, even the excessive scar tissue decorating his body would be smooth to the touch.

“S-stop.” Will’s hand raised from the bed only to fall like deadweight.

Hannibal glided his touch to Will’s stubbled jaw and imagined shaving the boy’s face with a straight razor. It would undoubtedly cause Will severe stress that could possibly send him into an episode, of what nature was entirely up to the boy. His pure unpredictability was quickly becoming one of Hannibal’s favorite traits. Will made jumps from emotion to emotion that even Hannibal found difficult to follow. Instability at its finest, and all he required was a proper guiding hand.

Will’s eyelids twitched while his fingers flexed where they laid against the comforter. The drug had run its course through Will’s system, now it was only a matter of him waking up. Hannibal imagined Will would experience side effects similar to that of a hangover, a common occurrence yet with such little weight to his body the symptoms would be heightened. It could either leave him pleasantly pliant, a chance to further foster dependency, or agitated.

Hannibal resumed his position in the chair, crossing his legs at the knees as he waited. Will’s eyes fluttered open, dazed and glassy as he observed his surroundings. Ripped from whatever dream world his mind had created and dropped harshly back into reality, Hannibal knew it would take a moment. Will’s gaze finally settled onto him and recognition came slowly, followed by remembrance and then(to Hannibal’s amusement)anger.

“Welcome back Will, how do you feel?”

Will’s brows furrowed and his tongue licked at his lips. Hannibal stood and grabbed the glass of water he had prepared from the nightstand, a metal straw placed inside.

“Drink, you must be dehydrated.” He waited for Will to prop himself up against the headboard before handing the chilled glass to him. “Slowly,” he added.

Will’s lips closed around the straw and as commanded he sipped from the water, staring at nothing and everything as he did so. Hannibal smiled and Will glared up through his lashes before setting the half empty glass down.

“Better?” Hannibal asked.

Will nodded and Hannibal's smile deepened. Falling nonverbal was not one of the outcomes he had predicted.

"Do you feel nauseated?" He asked.

Will shook his head.

"Do you remember what happened?"

Will paused, the gears of his mind turning, before he gave an uneasy nod.

Hannibal hummed. "My apologies for sedating you Will but you were becoming erratic."

Will sniffed and his gaze lowered to his hands where they were resting in his lap. "Erratic… that's what you call it."

Hannibal had to smother his smile. Instead he tilted his head, feigning curiosity and misunderstanding. An act that he wondered if Will could easily see through, or at the very least notice the edges of the mask that were not firmly in place.

"Would you not describe your behavior this morning as such?"

"No."

"How would you describe it?"

Will paused again, organizing his thoughts. His head tilted and his eyes drifted up, a mannerism Hannibal had noticed early on when the boy found articulating his thoughts challenging.

"Self defense," Will finally settled on.

Hannibal raised a brow, an interesting response. "From?"

Will's eyes darkened. "You."

"If you recall Will you were the one begging to be hurt."

The wording was a risk and as Hannibal feared Will retreated from the conversation. Closing in on himself once again, hiding in the darkened hallways of his mind. Hannibal would shed light on them eventually, given the right amount of time.

Hannibal held out his hand and Will eyed it with disdain. "Come, I am going to bathe you now and change your bandages."

If Will wanted to refuse he did not voice it and instead allowed himself to be pulled up from the bed. The boy was unsteady on his feet and Hannibal supported most of his weight as they walked the short distance to the ensuite. Hannibal had made sure to wash away the remnants of Will's attempt from the bathtub and floor while the boy was unconscious. Will seemed to take notice by the way the tension in his shoulders lessened.

“Remove your clothes, I will start the bath.” Hannibal cut the tap on, leaving his fingers beneath the stream as the temperature of the water began to rise.

From the corner of his eye Hannibal could see Will strip, shakily and with fumbling movements that nearly had him on the floor more than once. The boy folded his clothes on the granite counter of the vanity and stood, hands cupping his groin. Will’s body was a recollection of his past, mottled with seemingly permanent bruising and scars of all variations. Hannibal wished to know the story behind each and every one.

He added some soaps into the water and they began to foam, filling the room with a pleasant aroma of lavenders and mild citrus. Another glance at Will showed that the boy had yet to move, head downcast, his mop of curls hiding any emotions that could be playing out across his features. Hannibal’s eyes trailed from the chestnut locks to the boy’s torso, where a majority of the abuse seemed to have been focused. Thin white scars were etched into the skin over each of Will’s ribs, symmetrical on both sides, a gruesome work of art. Hannibal imagined a scalpel was used or a razor blade, a tool with a clean and sharp edge. He wondered then how Will might’ve been positioned, laying down, standing, sitting? Possibly strung up by a rope, exposing the quivering cage of his ribs even further. Stretching the already thin skin until it was practically gossamer draped over sinew and bone. The abuser was likely Vincent, the man plaguing Will’s nightmares. Hannibal would need to acquire the man’s surname, if only to put an accurate face to his reconstruction.

“Do you remember how you received most of your scars?” Hannibal cut off the tap and Will’s head raised.

“Yes…mostly.”

Hannibal approached the boy slowly, aware that tensions were high for Will. “Do you remember how you got these.” He smoothed his thumb over one of the thin, white scars and the flesh beneath it jerked violently in response.

“Y-yes,” Will whispered.

Hannibal hummed, he would table the matter for later. “I am going to remove your bandages now.”

Will presented his arms without hesitation and Hannibal started with the right, gently peeling back the layers of white fabric until he could see coppery stains. The stitches had weeped no doubt due to their earlier activities but otherwise they were intact. The left set of stitches were in the same condition and Hannibal gathered the wad of dirtied bandages to dump in the waste bin before holding out his hand to Will.

“Would you like help?” He asked.

Will eyed the tub behind Hannibal while his fingers twitched at his sides. Hannibal sidestepped, creating space for Will to carry himself into the water if he so desired. Cerulean eyes drifted to him before finally Will stumbled towards the clawfoot tub, using the rounded lip of the porcelain to help lift himself into the soapy water.

The water settled just below the curve of Will's shoulders, collecting in the dips of the boy's prominent collar bones, and was clouded enough to offer some sort of modesty. Hannibal rolled the sleeves of his button-down to his elbows and knelt at the side of the tub, cerulean eyes trained on him the entire time.

"How is the temperature?" Hannibal asked, a simple question to help ground Will to the present moment.

Will blinked before his gaze drifted up to the ceiling. "I was strapped to a bed."

Hannibal's brows raised and a moment passed before he realized what Will was referring to, the thin white scars. How interesting, the many trains of thought the boy was able to follow, enough to even lose Hannibal.

"His bed?" Hannibal grabbed the washcloth that had been draped over the edge of the tub, dipping it in the water slowly as to not startle the boy.

Will shook his head, a jerky movement. "You could say it was mine…it was the bed in the basement."

"How did he restrain you?"

"With handcuffs…then he…he used a boxcutter."

Hannibal's upper lip twitched, disgusted with the tasteless abuse. "What was it that you were being punished for?"

Will scoffed and his lips quivered. "I don't…I don't know."

"Violence for violence's sake."

Hannibal lifted Will's arm from the water and began dabbing at the stitches. There was no art to what Will's previous buyer had done to him, a mindless mutilation meant only for sadism. But Hannibal would change that, allow the boy to see them as enhancements rather than disfigurements.

"You must have been very confused."

"You confuse me," Will whispered.

Hannibal smiled, appreciating the boy's bursts of bluntness. "How so?"

"I can't—" Will paused and chewed at his bottom lip—"can't predict you."

How Hannibal wished to praise Will for his observations, for his bravery in voicing a thought that could easily be a detriment to his survival. Instead he simply hummed and continued to glide the washcloth along Will's skin.

"Were your previous buyers creatures of habit?"

Will nodded and again his gaze drifted up to the ceiling. “They’re all the same…what makes them tick…and what doesn’t.” Cerulean eyes shook with memories of the past until they settled again on Hannibal. “What makes you tick?”

Hannibal’s smile broadened, basking beneath the scrutiny of those eyes. “These conversations, for instance, I find myself greatly enjoying.”

A crease formed between Will’s brows and he frowned before looking away, a retreat into himself, forts now rebuilt. Hannibal accepted it, he did not wish to overwhelm Will. That would only cause the boy to regress, to lose what little trust he was forming for Hannibal, and they would be back to square one.

Silence draped over them save for the sounds of dripping water as Hannibal cupped his hands to wet Will’s hair. The boy tensed, eyes screwed shut, and his chest began to tremble. Hannibal scrubbed through the curls quickly, if only to keep Will’s stress levels at a low for the time being.

“I am finished, you may stand and I will grab a towel.”

Hannibal took a fresh towel from the linen closet and when he turned around it was to the sight of Will standing in the tub. Hands cupping his groin and water clinging to his shivering form. With his hair wet it brushed his shoulders and Hannibal considered offering the boy a hair-tie if cutting it was not an option.

“Do you need help?“ Hannibal asked.

Will shook his head and with one leg he stepped over the edge of the tub and onto the tile. Except Will wasn’t using his hands for balance, still protecting his modesty, and his foot slipped. Hannibal stepped forward as Will began to fall and caught the boy in his arms. They both stumbled back but Will did not weigh much and Hannibal was able to steady them before it was too late. Will clung to Hannibal, the boy’s fingers digging into the meat of his shoulders while he kept his arm wrapped around Will’s waist.

“Are you okay Will?” Hannibal asked.

Will stared, unblinking, as if he were a deer caught in headlights. The boy reminded Hannibal of a doe at times, stumbling and vulnerable, but with the potential to become powerful. The fingers clutching at Hannibal tightened before finally he was pushing away. Hannibal let him go willingly yet kept a hand around the boy’s bicep as he handed over the towel.

“Sit on the counter for me and I will start with the bandages,” he said and retrieved the leather medical bag from where he had stowed it beneath the vanity.

Will wrapped the towel around his hips before raising himself onto the counter with visible struggle. He sat, slumped in on himself with his forearms presented.

“Are you in any pain?” Hannibal asked as he organized the necessary supplies out on the counter.

“I don’t want any painkillers,” Will said.

Hannibal’s fingers lingered on the glass bottle of morphine, next to it the sedative cocktail he had administered earlier.

“I can use a numbing cream on the stitches if the pain becomes too unbearable?”

Will shook his head, a mop of curls obscuring his face.

“You would rather suffer?” Hannibal placed himself between Will’s spread knees, a position that he noticed had the boy tensing.

Will remained silent and raised one of his arms, his hand trembling violently. Hannibal decided he would broach the topic later, considering self punishment was to be expected from someone with such severe trauma, it was not a matter he thought to be of utmost importance. He held Will’s arm steady and with his other hand he grabbed a saline soaked cotton pad.

“This may sting,” he warned but with a quick glance at Will it was clear the boy was not present.

Cerulean eyes stared at the wall, unblinking and unmoving, while pink bitten lips sat in a slight part. It was another image that Hannibal knew he’d end up committing to the pages of his sketchbook. A tortured mind in its purest form, laid out for only Hannibal to witness. Will, forced to relive horrific events behind the oceans of his eyes, suffering so beautifully.

“Will?” Hannibal dabbed at the stitches with the saline pad, curious if the presence of pain would bring the boy back to earth.

Will’s breath stuttered and as if in slow motion the cerulean eyes shifted to stare through Hannibal. Hannibal grinned and as expected Will did not reciprocate, leading him to wonder what happiness would look like on the boy. If Will carried it in his eyes like most of his emotions or if it was more full body, brightening him until he would be glowing.

“Welcome back.” Hannibal continued to clean around the stitches, memorizing the way Will’s fingers twitched. “Where did you go?”

“Somewhere dark.”

Hannibal wanted desperately to look at Will yet he knew of the boy’s aversion to eye contact, knew it worsened when he spoke of his past, so he focused instead on rewrapping the stitches.

“Would you care to describe this dark place? It could be cathartic to speak it into reality.”

“It’s real enough already.”

“Is it a location from your past?”

“Yes…” Will’s voice trailed off as if he wished to say more but could not bring himself to.

Hannibal taped off the end of the fresh bandage and Will presented his right arm without being asked, such a good boy. “How many times have you attempted suicide Will?”

The boy let out a trembling sigh. “Not sure…hard to keep track.”

“Were you punished for your attempts?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal had assumed so already but getting answers from Will was worth the redundant questions. “Did you think you’d be punished for your recent attempt?”

There was a pause and this time Hannibal allowed himself to glance up at the boy. Will was watching him and when their eyes met the boy’s brows furrowed.

“No…because you wanted to see what I would do.”

Hannibal nodded and taped off the final wrap of bandage. “You are very smart Will, has anyone ever told you so?”

Will grimaced, as if Hannibal’s words had physically hurt him. “No.”

Hannibal hummed and made a mental note to compliment Will more often. He packed away the medical supplies into the bag before placing it back beneath the vanity. And with his hand held out, palm up, he waited for Will to take it. The boy eyed him before reluctantly he placed his hand in Hannibal’s.

“Very good Will,” Hannibal said as he helped the boy down from the counter.

Will did not react and Hannibal supposed the compliment was too generic. No doubt Will’s previous captors had made a habit out of giving the boy empty praise, if only to keep him pliant for the time. Hannibal would not fall victim to such plebeian ways of conditioning.

“I would like you to get dressed then meet me in the study,” Hannibal said while he led them out of the ensuite.

“The study?” Will asked softly, his hand clutching the towel around his hips.

“Yes, it is the room I had sedated you in.”

Will swallowed, obvious in the way his throat bobbed. “Okay.”

“Thank you Will, I shall start your dinner in the meantime."

***

With a chilled glass in hand Hannibal made his way from the kitchen and into the study, where Will was waiting patiently. The boy was sitting in one of the leather armchairs, his legs brought up to his chest and arms wrapped around them. The position made Will appear smaller than he already was, vulnerable and at the mercy of others. How easy it would be to overpower the boy and end his life with a clean snap of the neck; but what a waste of a mind that would be.

Hannibal cleared his throat as he placed the glass on the side table accompanying Will's chair. The boy flinched, violently, and uncurled from his previous position. Placing his feet flat on the floor and his arms on the rests, fingers gripping at the seams of the leather.

"I apologize Will, I did not mean to startle you." Hannibal sat in the opposing chair, leaned forward with his elbows resting on his thighs. "Please drink."

Will's eyes shifted to the table and the glass on top. He grabbed it with shaking hands and held it beneath his nose, smelling it.

"It is a protein shake of my own recipe, I do hope you like chocolate," Hannibal said, surely answering the questions Will was too scared to ask.

The boy gave a slight nod before taking the metal straw between his lips. Hannibal watched Will's throat and the way his muscles contracted and expanded with each swallow. Will's brows had taken a slight furrow as if he could still taste the metallic tang of blood beneath the rich notes of chocolate.

"Slowly Will," Hannibal instructed.

Will listened, the eager gulps turning into sips before he was lowering the glass, now half empty. "It's good."

Hannibal smiled. "Thank you Will."

The ghost of a smile seemed to touch Will's lips before it was gone all together, replaced by the almost permanent frown. A step towards progress in Hannibal's book.

"Now Will—" Hannibal leaned back, adopting a more relaxed position—"do you remember when we spoke about therapy?"

Will shook his head yet his hands tightened around the glass.

"Use your words Will."

"No…I don't…don't remember," he stuttered out.

Hannibal nodded. "I expected, you had said that therapy does not work on you. Have you attended counseling sessions in the past?"

"Long time ago…before everything."

"How old were you?"

“Fifteen or sixteen.”

Hannibal retrieved the journal from his side table, flipping it open to the first blank page and taking out the pen from his breast pocket. “Your father placed you in them?”

Will set the glass on the table before folding his arms across his chest. There was a shift in the boy’s demeanor, no longer was he projecting timidness and fear, instead his eyes darkened while his chest rose and fell with heavy breaths.

“The school did,” Will finally answered.

“Am I right to assume these were mandatory?”

“In a way…yes.”

Hannibal wrote down the brief insights into Will’s past, a way to better understand the current version of the boy across from him. “Did you ever consider it was a poor counselor and not that therapy didn’t work?”

“I didn’t want it to work…so it didn’t.”

“I would like you to think of these conversations as just that, conversations, not therapy.”

Will glanced up to Hannibal, cerulean obscured by thick lashes. “Okay.”

“If you have questions Will I want you to voice them, that is how a conversation works.”

“Why…why conversations?”

Hannibal smiled, a reassurance to the boy that his questions would not result in a negative reaction. “You said yourself that you did not allow therapy to work, a conversation on the other hand can neither succeed nor fail, it only concludes till the next.”

Will nodded and his eyes began to wander. “What do we talk about?”

“Anything you’d like Will but may I start tonight?” Hannibal asked, fully aware that the request for permission would rattle the boy.

As Hannibal expected Will’s eyes widened and his teeth bit at his already blushed lip. Consent would be another essential tool in building trust between them.

“Yeah…that’s fine,” Will said.

“Are you aware of what agoraphobia is?”

Will nodded, Hannibal would allow the lapse in verbal response.

“Would the phobia be an explanation for your negative reaction to being taken out of the house?”

“I’m not…not scared of being outside.”

“No?” Hannibal jotted down a few notes. “What is it that you fear? The people that inhabit outside spaces?”

“Maybe.”

“Are you fearful of strangers and the prospect of meeting new people?”

“No.”

Hannibal had anticipated Will’s behavior, knew it would be less than cooperative and that he would need to use manipulation to some extent. He closed the journal yet had it remain in his lap, a sign that could indicate he was frustrated with Will and considering to end their session. Which could spur the boy into cooperation or further agitation.

“I am sure anyone with your past would develop a fear or lack of trust for strangers, there is no shame in it Will.”

Will’s jaw tensed, a subtle tic that would be unnoticeable to anyone but Hannibal. “You don’t understand.”

“Help me to understand Will.” Again Hannibal leaned forward, a show of engagement, openness.

Will was twitching, strung impossibly tight where he sat. His eyes bouncing from wall to floor to ceiling, never settling, a fight or flight response. His damaged mind searching for a way out, desperate for it but unable to see one. A stable person would simply end the conversation when lines were crossed yet Will was anything but that, so he would stew. Until Hannibal chose to cut the line and release him, only to be caught again tomorrow.

He placed the pen back in his breast pocket and set the journal on the table before standing. Will’s eyes followed and his breathing quickened with what Hannibal knew to be anxiety from anticipating a punishment. He considered what he could use to discipline the boy for his lack of cooperation. Physical violence would put them further from Will’s becoming while positive reinforcement would only promote the same behavior in future sessions. A middle ground would have to be discovered if it was to work effectively as part of Will’s rehabilitation.

“I think it is time to call it a night, I do not wish to upset you further Will.” Hannibal grabbed the near empty glass, aware of Will’s eyes trained on him. “Please wait for me in your bedroom while I wash this.”

Will made no move to stand and Hannibal hesitated to leave the study, locking eyes with trembling cerulean. “Now Will.”

As if a switch had been flipped Will pushed himself out of the chair and left the room, followed by the telltale sound of footsteps climbing stairs. The boy appeared scared but Hannibal had come to understand that it could all be a ruse. A survival tactic to appear non-threatening, something Hannibal has employed himself more often than not.

Hannibal washed the glass in the sink and placed it in the drying rack, listening intently to the sounds of the house. He couldn't hear movement from upstairs which meant Will was likely obeying and he would find the boy sitting on the bed.

He climbed the stairs, deliberately silent to prevent Will from preparing himself, he wanted the boy in suspense. He arrived at Will's doorway and like he predicted the boy was sitting at the edge of the bed, head hung low with hands gripping the mattress. Hannibal stepped into the room loudly yet unlike in the study Will didn't jump from his skin. His head raised slowly and Hannibal could see a redness beneath his eyes, he had been crying.

"Are you ready for bed Will?" Hannibal asked as he made his way into the ensuite to retrieve the bag beneath the vanity.

"Yes."

Hannibal took the bag into the bedroom and placed it at the foot of the bed, a position where Will could see everything if he chose to. He picked through different glass bottles, bypassing the morphine and sedative cocktail of his own creation for the propofol. Will was watching and as Hannibal brought the bottle out of the bag he was met with shuddering breaths. A middle ground has been found.

"You have been quite agitated today so I have decided to give you something to help you relax." Hannibal set the bottle down on the bed before selecting one of the syringes. "Sleep is crucial for a healthy mind Will."

"I can sleep," Will mumbled.

Hannibal stuck the needle into the rubber stopper of the bottle, only taking out about three milligrams. He pressed the plunger to release any air before stepping closer to Will and holding out his hand.

"Your arm Will."

Will chewed at his lip, a tic Hannibal had come to notice when the boy was thinking. Weighing out the pros and cons, devising every possible outcome.

"I…I can sleep."

"Until you have proven to me that you are able to control your agitation after our conversations then I will have no choice but to sedate you," Hannibal said, his hand still out waiting for Will. "Your arm Will, now."

Will didn't move, his hands remaining where they clutched the edge of the mattress. Force was not something Hannibal wished to employ until far later in their relationship yet it was clear that Will was not going to cooperate. He reached for Will's arm but was stopped by the boy grabbing his wrist, blunt nails digging into his skin.

"Will—"

"Han…Hannibal…please," Will whispered.

Hannibal stared down at Will, the boy's body trembling, cerulean eyes wide. He set the syringe down while Will's eyes tracked his every movement. Gently Hannibal pried Will's hand from his wrist and held it, smoothing patterns over the thin skin.

"I will lock your bedroom door, does that seem fair Will?" Hannibal asked.

Will nodded and met Hannibal's eyes. "Yes…thank you."

Hannibal stepped away to the foot of the bed, where he placed the unused syringe back into the bag. He stowed the bag back beneath the vanity and lingered in the bedrooms doorway. Will still hadn't moved yet his head was raised, staring, and with a sudden calmness that had Hannibal smiling.

"Goodnight Will." Hannibal slipped the skeleton key from his pocket. "Sleep well."

"Goodnight Hannibal," Will said softly.

Hannibal locked the door and pocketed the key. His eyes slid shut and he took a steadying breath, the sound of his name rolling from Will's tongue echoing off the halls of his memory palace. The plaster of said halls melting to a beautiful blue, the color closest to cerulean. He descended the stairs, making his way into the study where the scent of Will was still the strongest. A mixture of warmth and spice, along with the intoxicating tang of fear.

The musk was dulled as Hannibal opened the bourbon decanter, notes of oak and rich chocolate an onslaught on the senses. It was a fine spirits yet Hannibal found he still preferred the heady musk of the boy. He poured himself a few fingers before taking his place in the leather armchair. The journal was still on the side table and he brought it into his lap, flipping it open to the first page labelled 'session one'.

"Will Graham, what a remarkable boy you are."

Chapter End Notes

Ohhhh my god Will said Hannibal's name, idk about you guys but I absolutely love when people use my name lol

Anyway thank you for reading this update and I hope everyone is doing good, love you guys!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steam rose above the walls of the glass stall. Some gathering on the glass as condensation, droplets sliding down and carving out paths like tears on cheeks. The steam was quick to fog over the paths and would do so over and over again, until Will cut the water off or it ran cold; whichever came first.

The water stung the cuts on Will's wrists. Seeping between the stitches, irritating the still healing skin. It was a subpar distraction and combined with the burn of the scalding water it still wasn't enough to stop yesterday's events from replaying in his head. To ignore how easily Hannibal had manipulated him.

Hannibal.

Hannibal. Hannibal. Hannibal.

He had never meant to use the man's name. To cross that invisible boundary of no return. The name held power over the man but it was power given to Will on purpose, and he didn't want it. To be aware of one's manipulation seemed to be of little help and somehow he found himself more lost than usual.

He wasn't any closer to discovering what Hannibal truly wanted from him.

There was a knock on the en-suite door and Will blinked, suddenly wondering how long he had been standing, motionless, beneath the shower head.

"Will?"

Will sucked in a trembling breath, the air thick with steam. "Yes?"

"You have been in there for awhile, are you okay?"

Will wanted to laugh, what an inane question to ask someone like him. "Fine…I'm almost done."

"When you are finished I would like you to join me in the kitchen."

"Okay." Will's fists clenched, dull nails digging crescents into his palms, he needed to leave, soon.

He cut the water off yet still found himself unable to move. Feet planted to the slick floor, water dripping from his hair as he stared, transfixed, at the drain. He considered what would happen if he never left the bathroom, wondered how long it would take for Hannibal to retrieve him. To rip the door from its hinges and drag him from the shower, calling his name

and lacing his tone with concern. Because surely none of Will's previous owners had worried for him, which is what makes Hannibal different, the man striving to be unique.

On a mission to separate himself from the monsters of Will's past, when the man surely must be aware they all fall into a spectrum in the end. Ranging from bad to downright cruel and horrific. He was still undecided where to place Hannibal.

The water clinging to Will's skin was beginning to cool, sending chills down his spine that erupted into goosebumps. He was shivering and a familiar ache of hunger was blooming in the pit of his stomach. How long has he been standing here?

"Don't move," He said.

Will's breath hitched and the ache of hunger soured into nausea. He was behind him, Will knew it, towering over him with a disgusting smirk curled at His chapped lips.

"Get on your knees for me," He said.

Will could feel the clammy touch of a hand on his shoulder as he was pushed down to his knees, bones cracking on the unforgiving hardness of the floor. The glass walls shattered around him, replaced by a dingy, white shower curtain. Still stained in certain areas with faded blood that the bleach just couldn't get out.

"Look up, now," He said.

Will obeyed and raised his head, wet curls plastering themselves to his forehead. Rough hands stroked his face and his chest began to tremble, forcing out breaths that were too shallow, too fast. Leaving him lightheaded, his vision beginning to tunnel.

"Are you scared?" He asked.

Yes was what Will wanted to scream at Him. Of course he was scared, he was petrified, but there was no right way to answer Him.

"Fucking pussy," He sneered.

The shower head cut on, pelting Will in the face, while a hand grabbed a fistful of his hair to hold him steady. Will couldn't breathe and with every gasp water was forced into his mouth and nose, choking him. Panic was setting in, overloading his heart and brain until the pleading wasn't enough and he reached for the hand in his hair. Only there was no hand, no pelting water, no stained shower curtain.

Will opened his eyes and there was only himself, collapsed onto his side, with his face pressed to the shower floor. He couldn't move, as if his head had been detached from his body, forced to watch himself rot from the inside out. Only his eyes seemed able to move, rolling around in his skull like marbles.

The panic continued to simmer beneath his skin. Weighing him down to the floor, rigid as a corpse. There was no telling how long he had been dissociating, how long he had been

paralyzed, or how long it would last. Hannibal would come retrieve him soon and once again he would be at the man's mercy; and any ounce of autonomy he still held would be taken.

Tremors suddenly began, pulsing through every fiber of Will's muscles, and his eyes rolled shut. Willing his body to stop, to gather his wits and stop. He just wanted it to stop, to make it all stop.

"Han…" his teeth were chattering, the tension in his jaw at its highest. "Han…Hannibal."

The man would never hear him from downstairs, awaiting his arrival in the kitchen, his morning smoothie growing warm.

"Hannibal," Will called out, a little louder.

His fingers flexed against the floor, slight movement returning to his extremities that he used to knock against the porcelain. Praying that the floors of Hannibal's house were not too thick.

"Ha…Han…Hannibal." He dropped his fist down again, the thud echoing softly in the ensuite.

Will listened before doing it again and again until finally the pad of socked feet could be heard approaching the door.

"Will?" The man said followed by a soft rapping of knuckles.

"Hanni…Hannibal," Will called between gasps of breath.

Seconds passed before the door was unlocked and Hannibal's eyes met Will's. The man paused, as if he wished to speak but could not find the proper words. Instead Hannibal grabbed the towel Will had hung on the door and draped it over his body before he was gathered up in the man's arms. The tremors continued, somehow amplified with the lack of floor beneath him, and again his eyes rolled shut. He was being carried out of the shower, he knew that much, and perhaps even out of his bedroom as his time in Hannibal's arms seemed to stretch.

Suddenly Will was reminded of the fairytales he was read as a kid, sitting in a circle with the other children on a rug that hadn't been cleaned in months. The stories about princesses being rescued from towers guarded by dragons and carried to safety by their knight in shining armor. Will had been carried off many times in his life but never by knights, only more dragons. Transferring him to new towers over and over again until finally there would be nothing left of him to carry. A pile of flesh, writhing and rotting in the arms of his captors.

"Are you able to open your eyes Will?"

Will nodded, or he thought he did, and from the slight part of his eyelids he could see Hannibal moving about the room. He had been laid down on a bed and to his side Hannibal rummaged through a familiar bag. The tremors increased and no matter how many breaths he took it wasn't enough to fill his aching lungs. Hannibal took notice and gently he placed his hand flat against Will's heaving chest.

“Will you are having a panic attack induced seizure and you are now hyperventilating, I need you to attempt to control your breathing,” Hannibal said calmly yet Will couldn’t listen.

Not when he could see the syringe in the man’s other hand, a clear liquid filling a quarter of the tube. The ditches of his elbows began to burn and he half expected the faded pinpricks to reopen, oozing dark and tainted blood. Hannibal seemed to follow Will’s eyes and the man raised the syringe, the needle uncapped, glinting in the light.

“This is valium, it will help.”

Will shook his head and along with a dark tunnel forming in his vision tears began to burn his waterline. “N-no…no…no.”

Hannibal’s hand slid away from Will’s chest and grabbed his right wrist, attempting to straighten his arm. Will struggled, clawing at Hannibal’s forearm until he was sure his nails had broke skin. The man’s hold never wavered, only tightened, until Will was sure his bones would be fractured. He wanted to crawl away but his body was still rigid, wracked with tremors, and a lack of oxygen he had convinced himself of. Instead he reached for the hand holding the syringe, forcing Hannibal to jerk away.

“Will if you don’t stop I will use force,” Hannibal warned, the man’s voice muffled behind the rushing of Will’s blood in his ears.

Will ignored him and again reached for the syringe. He didn’t even get close, stopped by Hannibal’s hand dropping his wrist and moving to clutch his neck, pushing it down to the mattress below. Any air Will had been desperately gasping for was cut off and his hands flew up to grapple for his life. Except the man was strong, practiced, and easily with each passing second he squeezed. Until Will’s arms dropped to his sides and the tunnels consumed his vision, his head throbbing in sync with every panicked beat of his heart.

He hadn’t expected this, did not consider that calling for Hannibal would have resulted in being choked to death. It wasn’t a very painful way to go but oddly enough he had expected…more from the man. Not something so mundane as strangulation, it just didn’t seem to fit the man’s…design.

*

The earth was moving. A constant steady motion accompanied with a light hum of vibrations. It reminded Will of the night he had been taken all those years ago. Laying on the floor of the minivan, bag overhead, with only the mumble of voices and vibrations of the road to keep him company. Except there was no bag blinding him and he wasn’t immobilized on the stained carpet of a minivan. He was sitting up, a seatbelt crossing his chest, with his head resting against the glass of a window.

“I’m not dead,” he croaked, the muscles of his throat aching.

“No you are not, does that disappoint you?” A familiar voice asked from the drivers seat.

Will didn't recognize the landscape flying past the car but he supposed he wouldn't recognize anything anymore. The world had moved on without him.

"Does it disappoint you?" He couldn't look at Hannibal, not yet.

"I had no intention of killing you Will," Hannibal answered, a 'no' in his own way.

Will realized that and somehow it was a slight comfort, he had more time. "What did you give me?"

"A small dose of valium, which I will be requiring you to take daily until we have found a more suitable way to manage your panic attacks."

Will's eyes drifted down to his arms, where they were laying limp in his lap. He raised the sleeve of his sweater, a piece of gauze taped to the ditch of his left elbow, an upgrade from the duct-tape he had been accustomed to.

"Would you prefer a pill?" Hannibal asked.

"I would prefer nothing."

Hannibal sighed. "Will you suffered from a panic attack induced seizure, it was mild but your body cannot continue to be placed under such duress."

"Duress is all I know."

"And I wish to change that but it will only work with your cooperation."

Finally Will looked to Hannibal and the man met his eyes, fleetingly, before focusing again on the road. The man's words dripped with sickening sincerity, enough to make Will's stomach churn; or it was the lingering hunger.

"Where are you taking me?" He asked.

"We are heading to my office, I must finish some paperwork I had left behind."

Despite the valium coursing through his veins Will's heart rate spiked. "Your…are your…"

"No Will," Hannibal cut in, a soft smile grazing his lips. "It will only be the two of us."

Will looked away to the windshield, watching how the road disappeared beneath the curve of the hood. "Is that meant to comfort me?"

"I cannot control how you choose to interpret my words."

"But you want to," Will whispered.

Hannibal laughed, a soft yet deep sound that was unlike anything Will had heard. "I would think most people do not want their words to be misunderstood."

The road continued to warp beneath the car, a never-ending flow. Car rides were never something Will enjoyed, normally gagged and restrained in a poorly ventilated van or trailer, never in the passenger seat. It was too much of a risk that his captors or owners were never willing to take. Easily he could jump from the moving car and if he lived or died was really none of his concern.

“I would argue that one of every human beings biggest fear is to be misunderstood, would you agree Will?”

Will shrugged, unsure if Hannibal saw it. “Not if you’ve never understood yourself.”

“Feel misunderstood Will?” Hannibal asked.

“Always.”

Hannibal tongue clicked. “What triggered your panic attack?”

Will’s eyes fell to his lap and he shivered, phantom drops of water still clinging to his skin. “What doesn’t?”

“Was the shower a direct trigger?”

“I don’t know.’’

Again Hannibal laughed softly. “Not fond of introspection?”

“Not fond of sharing,” Will clarified.

“I understand Will.”

It was a deliberate choice of words that nearly had Will smiling, nearly. Hannibal’s blatant conditioning was amusing yet he would not give the man the satisfaction of seeing him smile.

The car began to slow and as a result Will’s heart spiked. They were in a suburb of sorts, the road lined with vintage buildings that Will felt too poor to even look at. The blinker came on and carefully Hannibal pulled the car up to the sidewalk of one particular beige brick building. Many windows lined the front of the building while concrete steps led up to the entrance, a brick and stone awning over the door.

“This is your office?” Will asked, his hands beginning to shake where he was clutching the door’s armrest.

“Yes, my own private practice.”

Will nodded, the heat from his breath fogging the window. “No wonder you paid so much for me.”

“I have also been privileged with generational wealth but yes money is of no issue to me,” Hannibal explained.

Will had expected as much, always the trust fund babies finding their way to auctions. The weight of their wealth too much to handle, the stress of it all, and what better way to relieve it then to hurt an innocent person?

“Are you ready Will?”

The tremors returned, fighting tooth and nail against the valium. Something brushed Will’s cheek and he flinched, knocking his head against the window as he snapped towards the driver seat. Hannibal had touched him, still was, his body leaning close and his fingers grazing Will’s cheek. Their eyes met and like a deer in headlights Will froze. Hannibal’s hand pressed closer until he was cupping Will’s cheek, a gentle hold not meant to restrain. Something Will knew he could easily pull away from yet…didn’t.

“Tell me what has you so frightened,” Hannibal said.

Will focused on Hannibal’s chin, finding eye contact with the man to be nearly impossible. “People like me don’t go places.”

Hannibal hummed and his thumb smoothed over Will’s cheek. “And what kind of person is that?”

“I don’t…I don’t know.”

“You do Will.”

There was a familiar burn building in the back of Will’s already sore throat. A knot of emotion he hadn’t choked on in many years and had been content in swallowing it down, forever. He looked past Hannibal and gazed out the window as cars filled with bystanders passed them. Oblivious to the filth coating Will’s skin, laced in every bruise, cut, and scar.

“I remember in high school…learning about the bystander effect, do you know that one?” He asked, glancing briefly at the man for his reaction.

Hannibal’s head gave a slight tilt, intrigued. “Yes I am aware of it.”

Will gripped the seatbelt across his lap. “It’s sad isn’t it? People have been kidnapped in broad daylight, surrounded by a crowd who were all collectively thinking the person next to them would jump in and help.”

“You weren’t taken from a crowd.”

“No,” Will agreed and slid his hand along the belt until it hit the plastic buckle. “I’m thankful I wasn’t…the only person I can blame is myself.”

“Witnesses of the bystander effect often blame themselves as well and wish they had done more,” Hannibal added.

“They’re guilty by proxy.” Will held Hannibal’s gaze as he pressed gently on the release of the buckle. “A crime was committed successfully thanks to their helpful negligence.”

Hannibal grinned, bemused. “Do you consider yourself a victim of this particular effect?”

“Yes.” Will’s heart was in his throat. “I…I also consider you guilty…along with everyone else in that theater.”

Hannibal’s eyes darkened and the hand on Will’s cheek slid back, fingers curling almost possessively around his nape. “Have you ever considered I was there for other reasons?”

Will furrowed his brows, momentarily losing himself in the darkness of Hannibal's eyes. “Not until now.” His grip on the buckle tightened and the corners of the man’s lips twitched.

Hannibal knew.

Slowly Will leaned out of Hannibal’s touch and the man’s hand fell away, dropping to the buckle.

“I assume you’re ready to go?” Hannibal asked, a single brow raised.

Will never had a plan but whatever he had been preparing himself to do in the spur of the moment was put on pause, for now. He nodded and allowed Hannibal to take the buckle from his shaking hand.

“One moment Will.” Hannibal stepped out of the car and Will eyed the wheel.

The keys were taken, obviously, but he couldn’t help imagining driving away from everything. Leaving Hannibal standing on the curb and never seeing him again and…then what?

The passenger door opened, a gust of cold, crisp air chilling Will to the bone. Hannibal held out his hand, palm down.

“You are weak, I do not want you to fall and injure yourself,” he said.

Will knew the real reason yet as he took Hannibal’s hand and climbed out of the car his head spun, the world tilting on its axis. He squeezed Hannibal’s hand and the man pulled him close, their bodies pressed together as he was led to the front door. It wasn’t unpleasant and Will decided to blame his lack of fight on the unfamiliar surroundings and valium.

Hannibal unlocked the door just as Will spotted a man on the sidewalk, approaching them. He was tall, greying in the hair and beard, with his hands shoved into the deep pockets of a black coat. Will’s chest tightened and he stumbled back, further into Hannibal’s body.

“Will?”

The man met Will’s eyes, dark and beady, and he smiled. Pale lips stretched over familiar gleaming white veneers.

“Hannibal,” Will whispered, the man now standing still. “Do…do you see him?”

Hannibal followed his line of sight. “What do you see Will?”

The man continued to smile, laughing at Will's instability, his inability to distinguish reality from what was all in his mind. Will dropped his head, looking at Hannibal's shoes beside his own borrowed ones, he was real.

"Can we go inside?" He asked, footsteps following his words.

"Of course." Hannibal's touch fell to the small of his back and the door was opened.

Will allowed himself to be led, unwilling to look up from the floor as they made their way deeper into the building. They stopped again at another door which Hannibal unlocked and held open, waiting for Will to enter first. He did, finally looking up to take in what must've been Hannibal's office.

It was unlike anything he had expected, which he honestly wasn't expecting much. Having only been exposed to stock images of stuffy rooms with tacky chairs or couches, baby blue walls and the mandatory plant sitting in the corner, revealing itself to be fake upon closer inspection. He should have known Hannibal's office would be nothing like that, if his house was anything to base the man's interests off of.

"Surprised?" Hannibal asked as he made his way to the polished wood desk.

Will nodded, stuck in place as he couldn't help but admire the rows of bookshelves in the loft. He couldn't remember the last time he read a book, nevertheless hold one.

"I don't remember the last time I read a book." Will cringed at his own admission which he hadn't meant to say aloud.

"You may explore, careful on the ladder," Hannibal said.

Will turned to Hannibal, unsure if the man had meant it only to receive a soft smile. He loathed the excitement the granted permission gave him but he supposed that what happened in Hannibal's office would stay there, since he didn't expect to be coming back anytime soon.

The ladder was something similar to those you'd see in a library, placed on the opposite side of the room closer to the grand windows. Will refrained from looking out to the street as he climbed, he didn't need monsters from his past ruining a moment in the present.

The air smelled different in the loft. Stuffy with paper and leather and age, nothing like the almost dirty scent of the public library from his youth.

"Have you read all of these?" He asked, aware that Hannibal was watching him intently.

"The majority yes."

Will allowed his fingers to brush the spines of the books, a barely there touch that would leave no trace if anyone ever came looking. The majority of the titles were in languages he couldn't read but some were in English, familiar classics that he recognized from highschool. While others were journals, labelled with different years that he assumed held patient notes.

“Are you starting a journal on me?” He glanced down at Hannibal, who was still sitting at his desk.

“Would it upset you if I was?” Hannibal retorted, a ‘yes’ in his words.

Will shrugged, eyes falling on the titles marked H. Lecter. “Just don’t publish anything about me.”

“If I were to I can assure you I would obscure the information so you would be unrecognizable.”

“How about you publish it posthumously,” Will suggested.

Hannibal laughed. “After your death or mine?”

Will stopped in his pacing and stared down at the man. “Whichever comes first.”

Again Hannibal’s lips twitched, harder to see from above him yet it was there, a new micro-expression for Will to learn.

“Do thoughts of death frequent you often?” Hannibal asked as he stood from the desk, striding to the center of the room.

Will resumed his pacing, stitches throbbing beneath his sleeves. “I’ve found suicidal ideation is unavoidable.”

“Have you ever had thoughts of violence towards others?”

“Who wouldn’t.” Will put his back to Hannibal, fingers trailing over a collection of DSMs. “Everyone has thought about killing someone.”

He rubbed a hand over the stitches, the phantom weight of the straight razor sitting heavy in his palm. Along with the thought of what could’ve happened if he had turned the blade to Hannibal instead.

“Who did you see on the sidewalk Will?”

Will’s stomach dropped while the windows called his name, begging for him to check. To see Him standing outside, the same shit eating grin he always wore spread across his lips.

“You didn’t see anything…so it doesn’t matter,” Will said.

“Have you always suffered from hallucinations?”

The red stripes on the curtains began to warp, melting into the white fabric, as if dripping blood. “Yes…they’ve worsened over time.”

Movement caught Will’s eye and he looked down to watch Hannibal situate himself in one of the two chairs, popping the button of his suit jacket open with a practiced twist. Hannibal caught his stare and again offered a smile, motioning to the chair across from him.

“Join me?”

Will scoffed, it was like the study in the man’s home yet entirely different at the same time. He looked again at the curtains, expecting to see fabric bathed in red, only to see nothing had changed. Hannibal was now watching him, waiting for a decision, and he wondered if the man would end up making it for him.

“You may choose a book to bring back if you’d like,” Hannibal said.

Will’s eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

Hannibal nodded, a reassurance. “Of course Will.”

Will turned to the shelves, suddenly overwhelmed with the daunting number of books. He passed over every title not in English, the medical journals, and patient notes. Until coming to a section of the shelves that Hannibal had apparently dedicated to greek mythology. The titles made little to no sense and many were a part of collections, so he pulled a smaller less daunting book labeled volume one. With the book clutched in his hand he made his way down the ladder and over to the chairs, taking his place in the one opposite Hannibal.

“What did you choose?” Hannibal asked.

“Something about greek mythology.” Will showed the book and Hannibal hummed.

“You have good taste.”

Will chewed at his lip as he placed the book on the side table, careful to not damage it. The book wasn’t his after all.

“Will—” Hannibal leaned closer, resting his elbows on his thighs—“I would like to know the reason behind your aversion to needles and medication.”

Will knew the question was coming, had been festering between them for awhile, yet it did nothing to lessen the knot in the back of his throat. He couldn’t think of a way for Hannibal to use the information against him if he chose to share it. The man was already well aware of his phobia and giving an origin to it would neither hinder nor add to their dynamic. It would almost be as if he was back in therapy, sharing trauma that would ultimately go in one ear and out the other.

“One of my previous buyers…he was…fond of sedation.” Again the ditches of Will’s elbows began to burn and he rubbed at them from over his sleeves. “Rohypnol was his drug of choice.”

Hannibal leaned back, crossing his legs. “He would inject you?”

Will kept his focus on the man’s hands, where they were resting in his lap. “Yes…almost everyday when he had first purchased me.”

“Was this man your first buyer Will?”

“Yes,” he admitted.

“It must have been disorienting,” Hannibal said. “Being unable to control your own body.”

Will shrugged and the taste of blood coated his tongue. “I don’t remember what he did to me…just…just how it felt.”

Again Hannibal leaned forward and from his breast pocket he pulled out a handkerchief, holding it out in the space between them. “You are bleeding Will.”

The blood was real? Will touched his lips and the pads of his fingers came away stained with red. He accepted the handkerchief and dabbed at the split he had unknowingly chewed into his bottom lip.

“Any medication I give you will strictly be for your benefit, not my own,” Hannibal assured. “I will also refrain from using needles, unless absolutely necessary.”

There was no use in arguing because in the end Will had to remember—he had no say in what happened to him. So he nodded and wrung the soft material of the handkerchief between his fingers. Hannibal’s head gave a slight tilt before he stood, hand out for Will to take.

“I imagine you are tired, I’d say we are finished here.”

Will gathered the book from the side table, tucking it beneath his arm before taking Hannibal’s hand. Like previously he kept his head down, allowing Hannibal to lead him from the building and out onto the stoop. Where he kept himself pressed to the man’s side, unwilling to place trust in his fragile psyche.

“There is nobody here Will.” Hannibal locked the door, his hand falling to Will’s back.

“I know.” It didn’t stop him from keeping his head down, ignoring the echo of footsteps approaching him.

Hannibal opened the passenger door and Will climbed in, setting the book and handkerchief down in his lap. The driver side door opened and from the corner of Will’s eye he saw a glimpse of a black coat.

He had taken Hannibal’s place, sitting in the driver seat, beady eyes creased with the familiar tight lipped smile. Will’s body went numb as the car seemed to shrink in around them. Collapsing in on itself like a vacuum, forcing Will closer when he wanted anything but that.

“Trying to escape again?” He asked.

Will shook his head and blindly he reached behind himself for the car door handle.

“You’re mine Will.” He said.

Will found the handle yet when he pulled nothing gave, the door was locked.

His smile grew, perfect veneers framed by a greying beard.

"You will always be mine." He said.

"Vincent…please…" Will didn't beg, swore he would never stoop as low ever again. "Please…don't."

Vincent's smile suddenly dropped, a heavy frown assuming its place. Vincent leaned closer, body halfway across the console while Will yanked at the door handle, chest heaving for useless breaths. Hands grabbed Will's biceps and he was jerked forward, his body bent awkwardly across the console. Forced against a firm chest as arms encircled him, his own hands trapped between their bodies.

"Let…let me…go," he begged between gasps. His nose filling with the musk of the man—a rich and earthy scent, unlike the usual burn of alcohol tainted cologne.

A hand rested against Will's head, before smoothing down his hair to cup his nape. Fingers tugging gently at the sensitive curls.

"Your name is Will Graham," a foreign voice said. "You are thirty years old and you are in a car outside my office."

"Office?" The numbness was starting to subside, bringing with it a sharp tingling in Will's hands and chest.

"My office Will," the voice answered.

Will held the man's clothes in shaking fist fulls. "Who…who are you?"

The hand in Will's hair paused its tugging and warm breath tickled his neck. "Hannibal," the voice said.

Will's breath stopped in his throat, caught behind the knot that was only growing sharper. Hannibal resumed the petting and Will found he had no energy left to fight it. So he collapsed into the man, body limp as if he was liquid spilling into the mold that was Hannibal. And Hannibal held him, as if he had been made to. Arms tight enough to be secure but not too tight as to restrain. The hand in his hair a reminder with each slight tug that Hannibal was real, he was real.

"They cannot hurt you Will, I would not allow it," Hannibal whispered.

Will shook his head and the hand in his hair pulled harder. "You…you can't protect me from…my…my mind."

Hannibal hummed, the sound vibrating in the cavity of Will's own chest. "Do not underestimate me dear boy."

Will laughed, or more likely sobbed, and for the first time ever he didn't want to be let go.

Chapter End Notes

Little fun fact, I have generalized anxiety disorder and do suffer from mild seizures due to panic attacks, my first one happened when I was around 11 or 12

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> I told yall I didn't forget about this story! I hope this chapter isn't shit lol love you guys ❤️❤️

"They cannot hurt you Will, I would not allow it," Hannibal whispered.

Will shook his head and Hannibal tugged soothingly at the curls threaded between his fingers. "You…you can't protect me from…my…my mind."

Hannibal hummed. "Do not underestimate me dear boy."

Will laughed bitterly and curled further into Hannibal's body, hands holding fistfuls of his coat so tightly that the boy's knuckles were reddening. Hannibal shushed him and did his best to hold the boy from over the center console. He would have preferred this breakdown to have happened inside his office, less confinement and would help to associate the space with comfort, but he was not one to complain. Holding Will like this was the closest they have been for such a long duration. Normally the boy was rigid beneath his touch but now he was soft, trembling, clawing at him as if he wished to climb inside; and Hannibal would let him if it were possible. He wanted to consume the boy, until where one ended and the other began was indefinable.

Unfortunately all good things must come to an end and Hannibal loosened his arms as Will began to retreat. He scurried away like a field mouse into overgrown grass, back into his seat and pressed against the closed door. His face was blotchy, a gorgeous red that in some places looked pink. Cerulean eyes polished like glass and wide, oh so wide and seeking. They sought across Hannibal's face for something he could not place but it must've been found, if the way the boy slowly relaxed was any indication.

He sat slumped in the passenger seat, eyes to the windshield and chest rising and falling unevenly. Hannibal leaned over the boy and grabbed the seatbelt, locking it into place. There was no reaction from Will during the brief close proximity, leading Hannibal to believe the boy was lost in another dissociation episode.

"Will? Are you going to be okay for me to drive us home?" he asked softly.

Will's eyes slid to him then back to the windshield. "Yes."

They pulled away from the curb and Hannibal gazed out the rear view mirror, focused on the unfamiliar car parked a few spaces down from the office. The car was silent, with anything Hannibal wanted to say needing to be saved for when they were in the familiarity of home.

He glanced at Will, still rigid and unmoving in his seat, and he wondered if the boy ever had a place to consider home at one point.

“Once we are home I would like you to wait in the study while I prepare lunch,” Hannibal instructed as he rounded the final turn to his home.

Will said nothing and when Hannibal looked to him he was surprised to see the boy asleep. Head rested against the window with slightly parted lips, soft puffs of air fogging the glass. He looked cherubic. Fallen from the heavens and into Hannibal’s open arms, where his wings would be clipped to perfection. Everyday a few notches towards progress, even now the simple act of Will being able to sleep was a sign of their budding trust. Hannibal almost couldn’t stand the thought of waking the boy but they were home and he had tasks for the rest of the day he was hoping to complete.

“Will?” He leaned further into Will’s space, close enough to smell the lingering scent of his soaps on the boy’s skin.

Will’s brows furrowed and the rise and fall of his chest became faster.

Gently Hannibal touched Will’s arm, shaking the boy lightly. “Will, I need you to wake up.”

Will jerked awake, eyes wide and breaths panicked, a beautiful display of fear. It took him only a few seconds to gather his bearings and school his expression, but it was long enough for Hannibal to paint the boy’s face onto canvas in his memory palace.

“We are home Will, I’d like you to wait in the study while I prepare our lunch, is that okay?” Hannibal asked.

Will nodded and without another word he climbed out from the car, waiting patiently at the stoop of the front door. Hannibal followed and as he unlocked the door he could sense the tension in the boy beside him. A spring ready to snap, fraying rope pulled to its limit. The door opened and Will hurried inside without a word, straight to the study.

It bristled Hannibal’s skin and he debated following him, chastising him that what he did was very rude. But if Will was willing to act out then it showed a level of trust budding between them, and he wouldn’t dare jeopardize that. He was sure Will needed time to process what had transpired and he would always grant the boy that.

Hannibal hung his coat and made his way into the kitchen. He rolled the sleeves of his dress shirt up as to not wrinkle them before washing them in the sink. A protein rich egg scramble was what he had planned, something light but still nutritious enough to keep the boy full. With a pan on the cooktop doused in oil Hannibal cracked the eggs into them, the yolks a rich orange that ran slowly into the translucent whites. From the fridge he grabbed a brown paper package and unwrapped it on the counter, revealing homemade sausages he had prepared a few nights ago. The meat had to be used or else it would have spoiled. He cut the sausage into coins before placing them in the pan, along with chopped peppers and various spices. With the heat higher he folded the eggs over each other until they were the perfect consistency and the meat was browned.

There hadn't been any sounds from the study and as Hannibal plated the food he wondered in maybe Will had fallen asleep again. He made sure to approach silently, stepping as lightly on the floor as possible. Except Will wasn't asleep, he was sitting in one of the leather arm chairs, knees pulled to his chest and arms wrapped tight around himself. Small and scared, fearful of his own thoughts that crawled through his mind. He need only accept Hannibal's help fully.

"Will are you cold?" Hannibal asked, an easy way to begin conversation.

Will shook his head, falling nonverbal was not one of the things Hannibal had predicted from their little outing.

He set Will's bowl on the table beside his chair before doing the same to the empty table opposite him. He took his seat and Will eyed the bowl of food beside him.

"A protein egg scramble, eat slowly and as much as you can," Hannibal instructed before bringing a bite of the food into his own mouth.

The flavors were satisfying and despite what he had said Will didn't move from his curled up position. Hannibal set his bowl down and leaned forward, forearms resting on his thighs.

"Will, can you hear me?"

The boy's cerulean eyes flickered up to him yet remained there, shaking and glossy.

"Do you remember our earlier conversation Will? I need verbal responses," Hannibal said.

Will dropped his arms and placed his feet on the ground before leaning closer, forearms resting on his thighs. "Hannibal…do you plan to kill me?

Hannibal's eyes widened, oh remarkable Will, continuing to surprise him. "An interesting way to start, tell me Will, what have I done to you to warrant such a question to plague your mind?"

"Call it a hunch." The fire Will had managed to summon seemed to weaken and he fell back in the chair.

"Are you basing your hunch on evidence from your previous buyers or on my own behavior?" Hannibal countered, fighting back a smile.

"It can't be both?" Will asked.

Hannibal leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs at the knee. "Your food is getting cold."

Will picked up the bowl and set it in his lap, stirring the scramble around with the polished fork. Hannibal watched, unabashedly, as the boy brought a bite to his mouth. Watched how his pink lips shut around the prongs of the fork; he would add trim the boy's facial hair to his list of tasks for the day. The fork slid from his lips, wet with saliva and empty.

Hannibal smiled. “I have no more of a penchant for violence than I would say you do.”

Will stared at him from beneath his brows. “If I’ve ever been violent it was not for violences sake.”

“What was it for then?”

Will took another bite, this one smaller. “Defense, I was not hurt willingly.”

“A dog forced to bite, that is how you see it?”

“Y-yes.”

Hannibal hummed and the fork in Will’s hand began to shake. “But did the dog ever enjoy biting the people?”

Will looked up and their eyes met. “Do you?”

Clever, clever boy.

“I have fortunately never been placed in a situation such as yours but I could imagine bringing pain to my captors to be a cathartic experience.”

“I’m sure that’s how they felt too,” Will snapped.

Hannibal nodded slowly, choosing to end their conversation as it threatened to upset Will past recovery. It was clear that the boy had yet to accept the darkness that lingered within in but in time he would be ready to embrace it, with Hannibal’s help of course.

“Once you are done eating I would like to trim your facial hair, is that okay?”

Will swallowed another bite, having eaten nearly half of his serving. “Okay.”

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Will sat on the counter of the vanity, legs spread and a towel placed over his lap. Hannibal had asked if the boy would’ve preferred a chair in the bathroom but he gave no answer, to which he wasn’t complaining. They would be closer in this position and any physical contact would be beneficial for their relationship.

Hannibal would have preferred to use a straight razor, a shining and unguarded blade against Will’s quivering skin. But he knew how much the boy valued his facial hair, so an electric razor would have to suffice for now. It was clear in the past the boy had been subject to forced feminization, if the hair removal was any indication.

“I’m going to touch you now.” Hannibal placed himself between Will’s legs and gently he held the boy’s jaw.

Will tensed beneath his touch and his eyes shut as the razor clicked on. The hairs fell away onto the towel and Hannibal studied the fine details of the boy’s face. A white scar cut across

his cheek, hidden beneath the dark hair, and he ran his thumb along it. Will jerked away, while his breathing began to quicken. Hannibal made no comment and continued, trimming the mustache above his pink lip. Little scars littered the highs of his cheekbones, along with a barely there dusting of freckles across the bridge of his nose. Relative to his body Will's face was remarkably unscathed, he imagined his captors had deemed it far too beautiful to damage.

Hannibal switched the razor off and set it down on the vanity. Will kept his eyes shut and again he allowed himself time to admire. The shorter beard made him look younger, more boyish, and enhanced the sharp sculpt of his jawline. He was Adonis personified and Hannibal found himself carving a statue into the marble of his mind palace, yet nothing would do justice to the real being.

"You may open your eyes Will."

Will did, gazing into him with his shining cerulean eyes, as if he could see it all, and how Hannibal wished that were true. They were still so close, with Will's thighs touching the sides of his hips and their faces only inches apart. Hannibal raised his hand and slowly he touched the white scar, smoothing his thumb along the skin.

"How did you get this?" He whispered.

Will swallowed. "A knife."

Gently Hannibal glided his thumb across his skin, to the scattered scars beneath his eye. "And these?"

"I don't remember," Will said shakily.

A dark line laid beneath the plush of Will's bottom lip and on a whim Hannibal slid his finger along it. Will flinched yet he didn't resist, if anything Hannibal could swear the distance between them was shrinking.

"This one?" Hannibal asked.

Will's lips parted and Hannibal pressed slightly on the pink skin. "A man…he bit me."

The boy's lip reddened beneath Hannibal's touch and he imagined pulling the teeth from the man that had dared to touch him. Imagined kissing the little dark scar, of tugging the plush lip between his own teeth. Then suddenly Will was leaning forward and their lips pressed against one another clumsily. Hannibal held the boy's face, steadying him, and kissed him properly, slowly. Memorizing the curve of his lips and the taste on his tongue, savoring every second until he decided it was enough. He pulled away first but stayed between his legs, wanting the boy to understand he wasn't rejecting; simply pacing.

Yet it seemed to already be too late.

"I'm sorry," Will whispered as he dropped his head, body beginning to shake. "I don't…don't know why…I…I'm sorry—"

Hannibal covered Will's mouth with his hand, effectively shushing the boy and shocking him as his eyes grew impossibly wide.

"I seem to remember a conversation we had concerning your habit of over apologizing, blink if you remember Will," Hannibal said softly.

And Will did.

Slowly Hannibal removed his hand. "Good, then may I ask why you are apologizing now?"

Will wet his reddened lips. "I touched you…without permission."

Again Hannibal pressed his thumb to the white scar, how lovely it would be for the boy to bare a mark of his own making. "You do not need permission."

Will's eyes searched Hannibal's face and a pinch formed between his brows. "May I go to my room?"

Before Hannibal had a chance to respond Will was pushing him out of the way before sliding off the counter. He hurried out of the en-suite and the telltale sound of a door slamming shut echoed throughout the house. Hannibal stared at the open doorway of the en-suite, he could've stopped him. Could've forced him to stay and chastise him for not awaiting his approval, but why would he? When this was what he wanted from the boy?

His remarkable Will, already showing such promise in such a short amount of time. If only he could see it too.

He gathered the towel that had fallen onto the floor, thankfully catching most of the hair, and placed it in the hamper. Then quietly he walked into the hallway and stood still before Will's door. It was silent but beneath it he swore he could hear the sound of running water, the shower perhaps. He would allow Will adequate time to collect himself but that wouldn't be long, he did not trust the boy alone.

*

Dinner was nearly done while the haunting glow of dusk shined through the splits in the curtains. Hannibal placed the final utensil on the seat across from him at the dinner table, a room in the house Will had yet to experience. He assumed the boy would not be accustomed to sitting at a table for meals, let alone across from the man that had purchased him. He could imagine previous buyers forcing Will beneath the table, maybe during dinner parties, crouched between their legs to keep them entertained. An insult to the capacity of Will's beauty, a boy meant to be beheld as the centerpiece, or rather the main course.

Quietly he climbed the stairs, the upper floor eerily silent and had been for the couple hours he had left Will to his own devices. The door was still shut and when he twisted the knob he was intrigued to find it unlocked, the boy must've come to the realization that he had a key.

The bedroom was empty yet the en-suite door was shut and the sound of running water could still be heard. Hannibal crossed the room and foregoing the politeness of knocking he opened

the door. Will was huddled in the corner of the shower, naked and soaked to the bone beneath the stream. Hannibal threw open the glass door and cut off the tap, before pulling Will's shivering form into his arms. He set the boy on the ground and grabbed a towel to wrap him in.

"Will do you know where you are?" Hannibal asked as he knelt before him.

Will was shivering, enough for his teeth to clack against one another yet he managed to nod.

"How long have you been in the shower?"

"D-don't kn-know…wasn't d-dark outside," Will mumbled.

Hannibal brushed the boy's wet hair back away from his face and cupped his numb cheek. "It's been at least two hours Will."

Will's eyes drifted around the room, focusing on a square of the tile. "I didn't…I must've… lost time."

"Your episodes have been getting more intense." Hannibal stood, taking in the shivering boy at his feet. "Dry yourself off, I will retrieve some warm clothes."

Hannibal left the room and crossed the hall into his own. He retrieved the maroon sweater the boy clearly had an affinity for and some flannel pajama bottoms he couldn't remember acquiring. When he returned it was to Will exactly where he had left him, unmoving, which he had expected. And with another towel from off the rack he began drying the boy's hair.

"Can you stand?" He asked once the curls were adequately dried.

Will nodded and with the wall as support and the towel clutched around himself he stood. Hannibal took the towel from him and begun patting the boy's scarred skin dry. He was still cold to the touch but hypothermia was unlikely, given the water was not too cold.

"I have laid out clothes for you on your bed, get dressed and then join me in the dining room." Hannibal handed the towel back to Will and as he was moving to leave a cold hand wrapped around his wrist. He turned back around, to see cerulean eyes staring back at him.

"Stay. Please," Will whispered.

Hannibal's fingers twitched and if it wasn't for his practiced self control he would've ravaged the boy before him. "Okay."

Will's lips twitched, as if he wished to smile but had forgotten how. They walked into the bedroom together and Hannibal sat on the side of the bed, content in watching the boy dress if that was what he wanted. Will draped the towel over the bed, unabashed in his nudity, and Hannibal imagined a warm summer day sketching in his study. The windows open and curtains blowing in the wind, with Will's naked body relaxed in the chair opposite him.

The flannel pajama bottoms hung below the juts of Will's hipbones, below the Adonis belt carved into his malnourished body. He pulled on the maroon sweater next, an oversized fit

that had the boy looking smaller than he already appeared.

“Ready?” Hannibal asked.

Will nodded and on a whim Hannibal held out his hand, wondering what the boy would do. As expected Will eyed his upturned palm before sliding his own hand into his. Hannibal gave the boy’s hand a squeeze before they left the room. They descended the stairs slowly and Hannibal lead the boy by his hand into the dining room.

It was a shame to let go of Will but the surprise on his face as Hannibal pulled out the chair for him was well worth it. Will took his seat and Hannibal rounded the table, taking the chair across from him.

“Beef Wellington and rosemary potatoes, in layman’s terms of course.” Hannibal smiled and Will’s eyes dropped to the plate in front of him.

“Salisbury steak is the closest thing I’ve ever had to this,” Will mumbled.

Hannibal paused mid bite. “I can assure you there will never be a Salisbury steak in this home.”

Will smiled, a downturned shy expression, before he wrapped his lips around the fork. His throat bobbed as he swallowed and cerulean eyes flickered up to him.

“It’s good,” Will whispered.

“Thank you Will.” Hannibal raised his glass of deep red wine and the boy eyed his own as if it were the first time he’d seen it. “You are welcome to drink but it is your choice.”

“I…I’ve never drank wine,” he admitted.

Hannibal found his brows raising as he popped some of the Wellington into his mouth. It was a possibility that Will wasn’t allowed addictive substances, as was the case with many other victims of sex trafficking. “There is a first time for everything.”

Will’s hand shook as he grabbed the glass, bringing it to his lips slowly. There was a pause, a final decision, before he was tilting his head back and his throat bobbed. He was unable to hide the grimace from his features and Hannibal couldn’t help but grin.

“Some wines are an acquired taste.”

Will nodded yet took another sip before returning to his food. Hannibal enjoyed his dinner parties, the satisfaction that came with watching people sit at his table like dogs begging for the fancy dinner scraps, unaware of what they were truly salivating for. But even the grandest dinner party could not compare with the pleasure that came with watching Will eat. The boy’s body nourished with his own creations, his art manifested into meals for his muse.

Between bites Will sipped from his wine, until both the plate and glass were empty and his cheeks had taken on a cherubic flush.

“How do you feel?” Hannibal asked.

Will gazed at him, pupils dilated. “Warm.”

Hannibal took a sip from his glass, smiling. “How long has it been since you’ve drank alcohol?”

“Years, we weren’t allowed to drink.”

“I’d imagine you’re fairly intoxicated now?”

“Was that your plan Hannibal?” Will leaned closer, arms on the table. “Put alcohol in front of me knowing what I’d end up choosing?”

Hannibal decided to play along, leaning closer as well. “I was curious what you would do.”

Will’s eyes seemed to darken. “I can’t imagine I’m that interesting.”

“You are,” Hannibal said.

The boy’s neck reddened and he looked down at the empty wine glass. “I forgot the book at your office.”

“I can retrieve it for you tomorrow, I’m afraid I must return to my clients.”

“You’re not bringing me?”

“Would you like to come?” Hannibal asked, raising a brow.

Will shrugged. “I don’t like to be alone.”

Hannibal nodded, the wine had loosened Will’s tongue nicely. “Okay, then you may retrieve it when we arrive.”

“Okay,” Will mumbled. “I think I’m more of a beer person.”

Hannibal laughed lightly. “I will keep that in mind for next time.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course Will.”

Will’s face softened from the usual scowl he wore and his eyelids drooped slightly. The boy seemed almost relaxed, at a level of ease Hannibal had not seen from him thus far. Will’s eyes slid to the sliding glass door, draped with gossamer curtains, while he worried his lip between his teeth.

“I kissed you.”

Hannibal nearly hadn’t heard him, the boy’s voice so soft, so uncertain. “Yes you did, how does that fact make you feel?”

Will's eyes slid back to him. "How does it make you feel?"

Hannibal grinned. "I was not offended if that is a worry plaguing your mind."

"I don't know why I did it."

"You do not need to know now, I am a very patient man."

Will smiled, shy and uncertain, and Hannibal would remember the sight for the rest of his life.

"It is late, would you help me with the dishes?" Hannibal stood from his seat and began gathering the empty plate from his placemat.

Will followed along, swaying on his legs as he did so. They walked into the kitchen together and he had Will load the dishwasher with the plates he rinsed off.

"Because of your recent worsening episodes I will require you to sleep in my bedroom tonight." Hannibal looked to Will, who was staring back intently. "I hope that does not upset you."

"Was that what the wine was for?" Will asked.

Hannibal cut off the tap and began drying his hands. "My intention was not to placate you with wine if that is what you're insinuating."

"I'll be fine on my own."

"I'm sorry Will, it is not an arguable matter. Please wait for me upstairs."

Will wasted no time in escaping the kitchen and Hannibal wondered if the boy would be so bold as to defy him, empowered with liquid courage. With the kitchen cleaned Hannibal made his way up the stairs and into his room, where Will was sitting at the foot of the bed. He didn't acknowledge the boy, instead went into the closet, where he changed into his sleepwear.

"Did you get me drunk to fuck me?"

Hannibal stepped out of the closet, staring at Will who was gazing up at the ceiling. "I would never do something so distasteful."

"N-no…answer the question…were you hoping for an outcome tonight where I made my own decision to have sex with you?"

"No Will, I did not, but you continue to surprise me everyday."

Will laughed bitterly and Hannibal stepped into the en-suite, the electric razor left forgotten on the vanity counter. He brushed his teeth and when he turned around the boy was right where he had left him, with cerulean eyes staring into him.

“Goodnight Will.” Hannibal climbed into the right side of the bed and flicked off the lamp beside him.

The blankets shifted behind him and the mattress seemed to tense beneath him, as if Will’s anxiety was seeping from his pores.

“Are you upset with me?”

Hannibal turned over so he could see the profile of Will’s face against the moonlight. “No.”

Will looked to him then as a single tear cut across his nose bridge. “You can touch me.”

Gently Hannibal cupped Will’s cheek before pulling his lithe body into his arms. There was a gasp, nearly a sob, and the body in his arms shook with held back tears.

“Goodnight Hannibal.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shadows grew and shrunk like breaths atop the ceiling, and Will's mind wandered to an old myth he had heard as a kid. That if you stared at your reflection in a dark mirror your face would begin to warp, smiling at you as hallucinations forced their way in. He had never tried it but he imagined that it must've looked similar to tonight. Shadows lightening and darkening, warping and writhing, while he laid beneath them stiff and immobile.
Except he wasn't alone.
Hannibal was asleep beside him, facing away on his side. He had allowed the man to hold him until he could no longer stand the touch against his skin and had rolled out of his arms. That had been hours ago, hours of staring at the shadows that had begun to look back. The warmth from the wine was long gone and he was left with nothing but that bitter taste of sour grapes in his mouth. He imagined if he ever needed to describe what regret tasted like it would be the dryness of overpriced wine.
Or the taste of Hannibal's saliva on his lips.

Will blinked and he released the tense muscles of his jaw. Slowly he glanced at the broad back of the man beside him, still unmoving, still expanding with measured breaths. The likelihood of Hannibal being able to fake sleep for so long was slim to none and he decided that if he waited any longer he would miss the rare window of opportunity.

Without lifting the heavy duvet he slid across the bed from beneath it, until his feet touched the fibers of the opulent rug below. He lowered himself to the floor and froze, breath held in full lungs, heartbeat slowed, as he merely listened to the air of the bedroom. Silence was the only thing to reach his ears, so he stood and crept slowly around the bed to the door. The tips of his fingers brushed the cool metal of the knob and again he glanced to the man in the bed, who was unmoving save for the measured breaths.
So he left. Slipping from the door with ease and into the eerily dark and silent hallway. To his right was the bedroom he had been given and before him the shadows descended downstairs, and he followed them. Until slivers of street light could be seen from the small windows above the front door. The idea of leaving ultimately entered his mind. Of taking only a few steps forward, unlocking one door, and running. Running and running until his feet bled and his stomach threatened to spill its contents.

And then what?

There was nothing out there for him. The world had locked him away in a dark hole years ago, with no expectation of him ever crawling his way out. He was meant to rot and die in that hole, never to be seen again.

He left the foyer, away from the slivers of light, and into the kitchen. It was meticulously organized and he easily found the glass cabinet that had caught his eyes after dinner. Wine bottles lined the inside, with white wines on one side and reds on the other. It was too dark to read any of the labels and blindly he reached for a bottle of red. The top of the bottle was

wrapped in a metallic gold foil and beneath it a cork was lodged firmly in the neck. He hadn't considered the act of actually opening the bottle and as he stared at the piece of cork his teeth ached beneath the pressure of his tensing jaw. He set the bottle down and began opening drawers, one after another, until he had searched the entire kitchen only to find nothing resembling a bottle opener. There were knives, lots of them, and he debated grabbing one to stab the cork with.

Instead he grabbed the bottle off the counter and made his way into the study, a room he found himself tolerating his time in more often than others. He had spotted the bar cart nestled in the corner earlier in the day, when he had been waiting for Hannibal to prepare lunch. It looked vintage and expensive, with glass panes set in carved wood, holding various bottles of liquor, and whatever a person would need to serve it. He knelt before the cart, closer to the very bottom tier where a small, polished wooden box sat. Inside was not a wine opener but a small glass bottle adorned with a wooden stopper. It was too dark to read the label that wrapped around it but he could see that the liquid inside had an almost greenish hue. The liquor was either expensive or rare, thus the need for a case, and suddenly the bottle of wine was forgotten beside him as he pulled out the wooden stopper.

The lip of the glass bottle was smooth against his upper lip yet the instant the smell reached his senses he recoiled, as the overpowering burn of alcohol coated his nostrils. It was nearly chemical in nature, something that should've been stored beneath the kitchen sink and not in a bar cart. He had never tried hard liquor before, had missed out on that young adult milestone. He remembered his father being a whiskey man and he was sure Hannibal owned a bottle somewhere on the cart…yet the one in his hand was already open and he threw his head back the same way he had seen so many of his buyers do in the past.
Licorice was the initial fleeting taste to coat his tongue, then came the alcohol, burning like lava poured down his esophagus. He gagged, nearly spilling the bottle still in his hand, which he set down before placing his palms flat on the floor. Fighting down the urge to throw up the stupidly large swig he had forced himself to swallow. It was as if the liquor was eating away at his stomach lining, like acid burning through metal. Melting away his muscle, fat, and skin until they dripped like tar to the floor below him. Tears sprung to his eyes as well and they slid from his nose down to the floor, where they gathered in pools.

The aftertaste was worse than what the wine had left in his mouth and he needed it gone, desperately. He sat back on folded legs and reached for a bottle on the middle tier, this one large and heavy, halfway filled with a dark liquor. He twisted off the black cap and decided to forego the smell test, instead knocking back the dark liquid in a significantly smaller swig. The taste of nostalgia coated his tongue as he swallowed what had to have been high quality whiskey. It was smooth, unlike the previous one, and it warmed the blood in his veins to a pleasant temperature.
So he drank more.
And more.
And more.
Until his gag reflex refused to swallow the burning liquid and his brain was sufficiently drowning in it. The floor rocked beneath him, as if the wooden slats belonged to a boat…one of the ones his father used to work on in Louisiana. When they'd take them out to sail on a test run and sometimes he'd just sit on the deck, face to the sky, feeling the motion of the

waves. Except now he was alone and the boat was adrift, surrounded by dark and ruthless water, rocked by an oncoming storm.

Will opened his eyes, expecting to see storm clouds only to be met with a ceiling draped in shadow. Somehow he had ended up on his back and around him the room seemed to spin. For seemingly no reason at all a smile crawled across his lips and a soft laugh bubbled in his chest. It echoed in the silence, an unrecognizable sound, one he hadn't heard from himself in years. It was an unpleasant realization and a knot formed deep in his chest, heavy and growing, while tears sprung to his eyes.

"N-no," he begged the shadows as those tears slipped from his temples to the floor.
Not now. This wasn't the time or place to suddenly be feeling sorry for himself. No amount of tears would ever change what happened to him and he stupidly thought he had drilled that into himself for good.

"Your ability to surprise me is quite astonishing Will."

He didn't bother to sit up, couldn't even if he wanted to, all he could do was shut his eyes and attempt to control the sudden rolling in his stomach.

"How much alcohol have you consumed?"

"N-not sure." Tears continued to slip from Will's tightly shut eyes. "A lot."

Footsteps echoed around him before a hand rested on his forehead, simply touching. "You're very warm, how much of the absinthe did you consume?"

"Absinthe?" He slurred.

The hand slid down to his cheek, catching tears and smearing them along his skin. "The green liquor."

Will managed to open his eyes, only to flinch from the soft light suddenly bathing the study. "It was f-fucking dark Han…Hannibal."

That elusive deep laughter echoed in the room and Will smiled up at the ceiling, his vision blurred with unshed tears. The pleasant haze often accompanied by alcohol was returning, forcing everything else normally occupying his mind behind a poorly shut door.

"Do you think you'd like to sit up?"

"May-maybe…you'd like to…" Will's words dissolved into more laughter and when he looked to Hannibal he was surprised to see the man smiling back at him. "Are you mad?"

Hannibal's brows raised, yet the lines of mirth creasing around his eyes remained. "No, I had heard you leave the room."

Will scoffed, not even surprised. "Just curious what I…would do?"

"Perhaps."

“So was I.”

“You are in control of your own actions Will.”

“More or less…’s always felt like less.”

“And in this moment?”

With a sudden burst of motivation Will pushed himself up from the floor, now eye level with the man crouched beside him. “I wanted to get drunk…say I succeeded.”

Hannibal grinned. “I would agree.”

Will’s eyes narrowed as he allowed himself to truly stare at the man. At the prominent structure of his brow and cheekbones, the various shades of nebulas in his eyes, all the way down to his shapely lips. He knew what they felt like against his own, knew the taste on his tongue. His eyes fell to the whiskey bottle between them and he knew Hannibal knew what he was about to do next. Now he was simply curious what the man would do.
He smiled before grabbing the neck of the bottle and running, well stumbling, to the entryway of the study. Hannibal rose to his feet immediately and they stood opposite each other, predator and prey. He brought the lip of the bottle to his mouth and drank another large swig.

Hannibal’s head tilted. “I think you’ve had enough.”

“I don’t think so.” Will took another swig and Hannibal moved a step closer. “I’m in control…of my actions…and I wanna forget.”

“Forget what Will?”

With the back of his hand Will wiped at his lips, wet with liquor. “Your taste.”

Hannibal’s expression shifted, minutely, and probably unnoticeable to anyone else, but Will had never considered himself like anyone else. As if a veil had previously been covering the man and somehow he had managed to peek behind it. Except he couldn’t stay to see more, to slip through the crack. Instead he ran, through the dining room and into the kitchen, where he stood ready behind the butcher block island. Hannibal entered the room only seconds later, the veil draped shut once again.

“Will, you are inebriated and you are going to hurt yourself,” the man scolded, his tone flat, disinterested.

When Will wanted a goddamn game. He drank from the bottle again, nearly choking in the process as Hannibal suddenly began to approach. The man circled one side of the island, forcing him to stumble away back into the dining room. The large table sat bare in the center of the room, cleaned of its placemats and centerpieces from their dinner hours ago. Hannibal was nearly behind him and he couldn’t help but laugh as he rounded the table, putting the furniture between them.

“Enough Will,” Hannibal ordered.

Will's body flinched involuntarily at the tone and he set the bottle down on the table before locking eyes with the man. "Make me stop."

Hannibal's gaze seemed to darken as he laid his palms on the table. "May I ask what outcome are you trying to achieve tonight?"

Will hadn't expected the question, hadn't thought that far ahead with his little game.

"May I share my theory?" The man continued.

Will decided to mimic him, setting his palms on the table as he leaned closer. "Please doctor proceed."

Again the wrinkles of mirth appeared around Hannibal's eyes, enjoyment evident there. "You have never had such freedom in nearly twelve years and tonight you have chosen to push those boundaries, in hopes I will reveal myself to be exactly like the monsters in your past."

That knot suddenly returned in Will's chest, bigger this time, as if all his organs had tensed up in the small cavity of his rib cage. "And why would I do that?"

"You tell me Will."

Will didn't like this…whatever 'this' was…and he slid away from the table until his back hit the molding of the stone fireplace. He wanted to run now and in his peripheral vision he could see the frosted glass of the French doors, leading out to the backyard. He knew he wouldn't be fast enough, would be caught before he even got the chance to unlock them. His eyes fell to the bottle on the table and he lunged for it, wrapping his hand around the neck before throwing it at the herb lined wall beside the man's head.

It shattered, Hannibal ducked, and he ran to the french doors; unlocking them before stumbling out into the brisk night air. The concrete patio was cold beneath his bare feet and then it wasn't as he was tackled, his tailbone hitting the grass first before Hannibal's weight forced him onto his back. The man straddled his hips, hair in his eyes and face slightly flushed, while his chest heaved with the sudden exertion.

The image of a glorious monster.

Will panted and couldn't help but smile as the burning alcohol rose in his esophagus. "I'm going to throw up."

Without a word Hannibal raised himself up and off his body, before helping him to his hands and knees. The man held his hair back in a tight grip as he gagged, stomach lurching, before vomiting into the grass. The taste of bile and whiskey clung to his mouth, while the sickly sweet stench of alcohol seemed to surround him.

"Are you finished?" Hannibal asked from somewhere Will couldn't see.

"I…" a gag cut off his words before he vomited up more of the burning whiskey.

"I will take that as a no."

Tremors overtook his body while drool dripped from his parted lips into the grass below. The weight of the world was falling down upon him, crushing and overwhelming. He had regurgitated the warmth of the alcohol and was left with nothing but the cold weight of regret.

“Can you stand?”

Tears stabbed at his eyes while sweat beaded on his flushed skin.

“Will?”

Blindly Will pushed at Hannibal only for his wrists to be caught in bruising grips. He tried to stand but the man was strong, and he was forced onto his back with his arms pinned to his chest. It was a familiar position used to subdue him in the past, always the bigger men using their weight against him. It wasn’t fair.
He had never been given a chance to grow.
Kept meek and small.

“I will restrain you if I must Will,” Hannibal warned.

Will couldn’t look at him.
His breathing wouldn’t slow.

“No! No! Let me go!” He screamed from beneath the burlap sack over his head.
He dragged his feet, dropped his body weight, flailed in the ruthless hands of his kidnappers but they never stopped.

They threw him onto the ground.
Ripped the sack from his head.
The lights burned his retinas and a weight climbed atop him.

“Don’t don’t don’t,” he begged.

The man pinned his arms to his chest.
“Little bitch never stops, get his shoes and pants.”

“Don’t touch me!”
He threw his hips up.
The man fell from him.
He tried to get to his feet but they were already on him.

Kicking him.
Hitting him.
Beating him.
Tearing at him until he was naked, laying in a puddle of his own blood.

“Keep this one restrained.”

Will looked up at what should’ve been one of his kidnappers, only to see Hannibal above him, head tilted and watching him curiously. His arms were no longer pinned yet he laid

beneath him, paralyzed.

“What do you want from me?” He whispered.

“Must I want something?” Hannibal countered, his voice soft, his face draped in moonlight.

“Yes…everybody does.”

“You desire me to want you in the same manner all the monsters of your past have.”

Will gazed into Hannibal’s hooded eyes. “How do you want me?”

“I want you.”

“Why?”

“Your potential.”

“Potential for what?”

“To become.”

Will’s mind was spinning, the haze of alcohol adding a level of difficulty to deciphering Hannibal’s already confusing words. He would become nothing, could never become anything other than a prisoner. A broken shell of a person, a dirty and worn mug.

“I’m broken goods,” he mumbled.

Hannibal brushed his hand through Will’s hair, away from his forehead, tucking the strands behind his ear. He leaned down and Will held his breath, only for warm lips to press against his forehead.

“Damaged perhaps,” Hannibal whispered before sitting back up. “Not broken.”

Will blinked up at him and quickly made the decision he could blame all his further actions on the liquor coursing through his veins. He grabbed handfuls of the man’s shirt and jerked him down, crashing their mouths together in a desperate kiss. The taste of the man’s mouth was still the same yet his lips moved with his. Hungry for what he was offering, for what he consisted to dangle before the man as something he could look at but not touch.

“Touch me please,” he begged, nearly cried in the pauses of their kiss.

Hannibal shucked the oversized maroon sweater up beneath his armpits before he splayed his hands over his torso, burning his skin alive. He whimpered and wrapped his arms around the man’s neck, kissing him harder, deeper. Distracting himself from the voices in his head begging him to stop, to fight, to kick and scream and not let this happen. He couldn’t let this happen. He would’ve never let this happen.

“Will,” Hannibal huffed against his mouth.

“Please…Hannibal.” Will arched his hips into the man, he wasn’t hard. Why wasn’t he hard.

“Will.”

Will grabbed Hannibal’s hands and pushed them down to his hips, below the waistband of his pajamas. Why wouldn’t the man touch him. What was he doing wrong?

“Hannibal just fuck me please why won’t you…you don’t…I want it…I…I want it.” Will was sobbing, the words leaving his lips before he could think.

“Just a pretty face.”
“A pretty boy.”
“Such a perfect body.”
“You’ll never be anything but a hole to be used.”
“That’s right, scream, I like them loud.”
“Take it, take it, tell me you want it.”
“Tell me you fucking want it!”
“Beg for it!”

“I want it! I want it! I want it!”

Will blinked as his body was being lifted off the grass, held in strong arms and tucked against the warmth of a firm chest. He couldn’t fight it, had none left in him, and allowed himself to be carried back into the house. He was carried up the stairs, down the hall, into a bedroom, and finally set down on the tile of the bathroom floor. The lights were blinding and he kept his head down, hair falling into his eyes and sticking to his tear soaked skin.

“Would you like me to run you a bath?”

Will stared down at his hands, at the vertical cuts on his wrists that had finally began the long process of scarring. He touched the tips of his fingers to his lips, still warm.

“Would you allow me to check you for injuries?”

“Are you going to punish me?” He whispered.

“You punish yourself enough.”

Will laughed and looked up to Hannibal standing over him, his own lips red, evidence of what they had done. The man knelt before cupping his face, thumb smoothing over the wetness on his cheek and the scar indented there.

“Your capacity for violence is revealing itself,” he whispered, embolden with liquid courage.

Hannibal said nothing, merely smiled, before standing and cutting on the tap of the clawfoot tub. He held out his hand to Will and he took it, allowing himself to be hauled to his feet and propped against the edge of the porcelain tub.

“Do you feel sick?”

He shook his head, he didn't know what he felt, only that he was sobering up far faster than he wished to. "Why don't you let me go?"

Hannibal paused, his lips parting as he seemed to choose his words carefully. "Would you like me to?"

"Would you like to?" Will snapped back, tired of the verbal sparring.

"No. I would not."

It wasn't what Will had been expecting to leave Hannibal's lips, the first real confession he had been able to work from him. The admission shouldn't have comforted him yet it did; would've terrified a normal person, kept and imprisoned, owned and controlled. Only he knew nothing else.

Suddenly Hannibal was moving, like a statue in a museum coming to life to turn off the water that had steadily been filling the large tub. He returned to stand in front of Will and gently began to undress him, pulling off the maroon sweater and the too big pajama pants, leaving them neatly folded on the vanity counter.
He didn't bother to cover himself. Allowed himself to be maneuvered as the man checked him for injuries. Scrutinizing every inch of worn and damaged skin.

"You have some bruising on your back, nothing severe."

He wasn't listening, only wished he had been hurt more.

"Do you need help?"

Will looked up from beneath his brows, at the stoic man covered in his metaphorical veil. He reached out, touched the shirt draping Hannibal's body, felt the power rippling beneath. Then he grabbed him, dragged the man backwards as he tipped himself into the tub. They fell in together, water splashing over the edge of the rounded porcelain and onto the pristine tiles. Hannibal pulled away from his grip yet he didn't leave, instead he sat, clothes drenched, and eyes glazed with shock.

"Take a bath with me?" Will whispered and to his own shock Hannibal grinned.

He adjusted their positions, sliding himself behind Will and pulling him against his soaked body. He hadn't expected the man to keep his clothes on yet he supposed Hannibal was also full of surprises. He allowed himself to relax against the man, to be held not hurt, coveted not kept. It was an uneasy feeling yet it was what he wanted, what he needed.
The water added a soothing heat, enveloping him and easing the ache that was the blooming bruise on his tailbone. Hannibal's arms had slowly wrapped around his stomach yet didn't tighten, simply rested there, a comforting and grounding weight.

The alcohol had seemingly run its course and he found himself growing heavy, eyes lidded as his head fell back into the crook of the man's neck. A weight pressed against his head and he gazed up to see Hannibal's cheek rested on him. Soft was the word he would use to describe the moment, soft and blurred, and he was sure the whiskey was partially to blame. Yet it

didn’t mean he couldn’t enjoy it while it lasted and he allowed his eyes to slip shut. Mind quiet and body held.

Chapter End Notes

Just a heads up I’m experimenting with some new writing styles so I hope that doesn’t throw anything off! Also thank you for the continuous support, I read every comment even if I’m actual shit at responding to them <3

Also for anyone that also reads Devil In Wolf’s Clothing I promise a new chapter should be out soon!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!